

# ENCHANTED HOME



*The 4th book in the Saderia Series*

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Sarah Renée

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# Chapter One

## Outlaw

Two furious pale gray and vibrant green eyes bored into Jeb's fur from across an endless expanse of darkness. A low, threatening growl rumbled in the distance, sending shivers racing up his spine. Somewhere in the background, hidden behind the blackness surrounding him, he could hear the sinister crackle of flame growing louder and louder. Terror burned in his heart when the loud rumble of the fire roared in his ears. A wave of intense heat washed over him, dragging him down to the ground.

Flickers of bright red and orange flames leapt up through the darkness around him. A memory of the flames leaping up a tall tree and charring the bright purple leaves into ashes faded into an image of the roaring blaze racing across a long strip of pale green grass. The flames flickered higher and higher, covering trees and bushes and sending a billowing cloud of smoke rising into the cloudless blue sky. Screams echoed around him as the memories of the flames suddenly disappeared into darkness.

The light, mocking sound of giggling slowly pierced through the silence around him, making his heart burn with pain. Two scornful bright green eyes shone through the blackness, meeting his sad gaze and never seeming to blink. Gray and green eyes appeared less than a second later. A sharp, furious snarl echoed through the blackness.

“Get out of my Empire!”

Jeb's eyes flew open and he shot upward into a sitting position, letting out a terrified gasp and looking around wildly. Frightened pants and gasps shuddered out of his chest and his bright blue and green eyes opened wide in terror. Struggling to calm the frantic beating of his heart and take deeper, slower breaths, he stared at the den around him and tried to push memories of the nightmare away.

Bleak gray walls made of rock rose up around him, curving upward to form a rocky ceiling above him. Shadows fell across the sharp, jutting edges of the stone, sending shivers of fear down his spine. Damp green mold crept across the hard, rocky floor beneath him. The cave den was completely empty apart from a tiny pile of fruit left in the corner. Flies buzzed around the measly leftovers, picking it apart piece by piece.

Taking a deep breath, Jeb slowly pushed himself up, trying not to let his paws shake against the rough, freezing floor. He glanced down at his bright yellow and black-striped fur, searching for any sign of wounds or injuries in case the dream was real. Looking back, he flicked his brown-tufted tail into view before glancing down and spreading out the green webbing between his yellow paws. A soft, shaky sigh breathed out of his chest when he realized he hadn't been hurt.

Jeb shivered when he looked around the cave den and realized his father was nowhere in sight. Casting an anxious glance around the den, he tried to shake off the cold fear that lingered after the dream and padded cautiously to the gaping entrance of his den. He nervously peeked out into the Spring, searching for any sign of his father.

Rocky walls rose up on the opposite side of the underground Spring and covered the back and front walls, closing in a huge open space. The cold stone floor stretched out in front of him, leading to the back of the Spring that sat just a few feet to the right of his den. Hundreds of jagged holes had been carved into the side of the wall, marking the entrances to the dens of the other kraguers and tunnels that led back to even more dens. A bright, sparkling pool of shimmering, crystal-like water glimmered in a deep basin just a few paces to the left of his den. The brilliant blue waters lapped at the stony floor of the underground, dampening the pale green mold and moss growing on the very edges of the spring. A faint beam of moonlight shimmered down into the Spring from a tiny hole carved into the top of the underground cavern, illuminating the bright Spring water and casting dark shadows across the back of the cave. The outlaws living down in the Spring sat against the rocky walls, giving him dark, eerie glances.

Stumbling nervously out into the main part of the Spring, Jeb headed toward the pool of water and paused when he spotted another kraguer racing toward him.

Telku skidded to a stop and frowned at him. “What are you doing out here?”

Jeb avoided his father’s worried gaze and shrugged. “I was looking for you.”

Telku let out a sigh. “You should have stayed in the den. It’s dangerous out here.”

Jeb flattened his ears. He tried to take in a shaky breath of the damp, musty air of the Spring and his eyes narrowed with pain. “Why did Zerone have to force us to live here? We don’t deserve to live with these evil kraguers! We’re not criminals like them!”

Telku sighed. “Save the speech, Jeben. There’s nothing we can do about it now.”

Jeb narrowed his eyes and muttered under his breath. “I hate Zerone!”

Telku let out a long breath of air and rested his brown-tufted tail gently on Jeb’s shoulder to reassure him. “Let’s not dwell on this. We should get back to our cave den.”

Jeb nodded weakly and started to turn around to pad back to his den, then froze at the sound of a light, familiar voice. “Telku! Jeb!”

The two of them whirled around to see where the voice had come from and smiled weakly when they saw who it was. Jeb’s mother leapt down from the hole at the top of the underground Spring and landed neatly on the tiny strip of stony ground that sat on the other side of the pool of water. Her blue and gray eyes glimmered in the darkness, and the faint glow of moonlight from the hole leading to the upper world illuminated her yellow and black-striped fur. She had several pieces of fruit clasped tightly in her jaws.

Jeb’s blue and green eyes lit up with a tiny glimmer of hope, but he froze when a sharp hiss echoed through the Spring. A kraguer with a cold smirk stepped out from behind the shadows just a few paces away from Jeb’s mother and let out a chuckle. The faint light shone down on the outlaw, making Jeb shiver when he recognized the pale blue eyes of Citcha, an outlaw who had been exiled for ridiculous amounts of thievery. A crooked sneer spread across her face when she sauntered over to Jeb’s mother.

“Hand that over, Jati!” she snarled, flicking her brown-tipped tail.

Jati hissed and narrowed her eyes. "This is ours!"

Citcha snickered. "Not anymore." Lunging forward, she rammed into Jati and sent her stumbling toward the pool of water.

Jati let out a cry of shock, sending the food tumbling to the ground. Before she could stop herself, she fell backwards into the spring water with a loud splash. Water splattered the stony ground and drenched Citcha's face, but she barely seemed to notice.

"Citcha!" Telku let out a growl of fury, but the thief ignored him and grabbed the fruit, letting out a wild, crazed laugh and racing back to her cave den with her tail streaming out behind her. Before any of them could stop her, she lunged toward one of the jagged alcoves at the back of the underground and disappeared into the blackness.

Jeb's eyes widened in alarm and he staggered to the edge of the spring. "Mom!"

His heart skipped in his chest, but before he could panic, his mother poked her head up out of the water, gasping for air. Her blue and gray eyes glinted with fury and annoyance and she spat into the water. "Citcha," she muttered, paddling swiftly through the pool of water and stretching out the green webbing between her toes. "Always causing trouble!" Letting out a low growl, she swam to the side of the spring and hauled herself up onto the stone beside Telku and Jeb, dripping with water and scowling in frustration.

Telku let out a long sigh. "There's nothing you can do, Jati. Come on now, let's go back to our den. I think we still have some leftovers from last night."

Jati crinkled her nose. "I hate leftovers. The flies have probably gotten to them."

Jeb shuddered, but when his parents slowly began padding back to their den, he reluctantly fell into step behind them. He grimaced when he crept into their den to see flies circling the leftovers and filling the den with an annoying buzzing sound.

Jati curled her lip and turned away from it. "Gross!"

Telku sighed and lowered himself down onto a clump of mold. "Just get over it."

Jeb's mother glared at him and gritted her teeth. "You two just had to go and get involved in Zerone's dirty business, didn't you? If it wasn't



for you two, he wouldn't have exiled us to this place and we wouldn't be living around the filth of the Empire!"

Jeb narrowed his eyes and felt a sting of pain. "Hey, that's not true!"

Telku gritted his teeth. "He's right. We're here because of Zerone's doing, not ours. Maybe if we had a less selfish Emperor, we wouldn't be here. How about that?"

"Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time," she muttered, flopping down on the hard ground. "You should have left Zerone to deal with his own fire."

"I'm sorry," Jeb muttered, looking hurtfully down at his paws.

Telku flicked his tail sharply. "Don't be. Our coming here was Zerone's fault."

Jeb let out a soft sigh. "Mom's got a point, though."

His father narrowed his eyes, his green irises gleaming in the dim light. "So we should be punished for trying to help someone?"

He shrugged uncomfortably. "Apparently that's how Zerone sees it. Look, I hate him as much as you or anyone, but he was kind of in a bad situation."

"That was his own doing." Telku flattened his ears and lashed his tail. "If he hadn't started the fire in the first place..."

Jati glared at him. "If *you* hadn't gone out in the fire in the first place, *then* we would be fine. If you had stayed where you were supposed to instead of getting involved in other animal's business like you always do, we wouldn't be in this disgusting place."

Telku gritted his teeth. "If you're going to keep blaming us..."

"If you're going to keep doing stupid things..."

"Stop fighting!" Jeb cut off his mother with a sharp cry, his eyes wide with alarm. "I hate it when you fight, and you're *always* doing it!" He shrank back when his parents whirled around to stare at him in shock and tried to avoid their stunned gazes. His fur prickled with unease and distress. Fights seemed to erupt constantly about that stupid fire and the Emperor's decision to exile them ever since they had come to the Spring. Most of the time, he tried to take both of their sides and get them to compromise, but it rarely worked and he hated that he could never stop them from getting angry at each other.

A long silence spread out between them before Telku finally hung his head and let out a sigh. "I'm sorry, Jeb."

Jati rolled her eyes and glanced guiltily at the ground. "Sorry," she muttered.

Casting an annoyed glance at Jati, Telku took a deep breath and gave Jeb a weak smile. "Why don't you get some water from the spring? I think the others are gone now."

Jeb glanced uneasily back and forth between his parents. After a long hesitation, he turned around to peek out through the entrance to his den and gazed around at the underground. A relieved sigh breathed out of his throat when he realized the shadowed Spring was empty of any outlaws. Taking a cautious step forward and trying to ignore his fear, he stumbled over to the spring and crouched down on the fuzzy moss growing along the edges of the basin. After looking nervously over both shoulders, he slowly bent down and lapped up a few drops of the shimmering water, feeling grateful that the Spring held one of the only pools in the entire forest that wasn't poisoned. Closing his eyes, he tried to enjoy the solitude and the cool taste of the water, then froze when a cool voice broke the silence around him.

"Hungry, Jeb?"

A tiny squeak escaped Jeb's throat and he jumped up and whirled around in alarm, his heart beginning to race. He froze in place and felt a wave of relief overwhelm him when he peered through the shadows and realized he recognized the kraguer standing calmly behind him as Secka. A shaky sigh of relief breathed out of his chest as the outlaw stepped forward. The light from above cast a silvery glow over the kraguer's smoky gray fur, pitch black stripes, and gleaming gray eyes. Sitting in the shadows near the back of the cave, the outlaw curled his black-tufted tail over his paws and watched Jeb calmly.

Nobody knew what crime the gray outlaw had been exiled for, but he didn't have the cruel, sadistic personality of a murderer or the greedy attitude of a thief. Everybody assumed from his apathetic disposition that he hadn't done anything too horrible to be banished to the Spring. Most of them thought he had simply caught Zerone on a bad day.

Secka raised an eyebrow. "I heard you had a bit of trouble a little while ago."

Jeb let out a sigh and glanced down at his paws. “Yeah, Citcha took the food my Mom brought in. I guess I am kind of hungry.”

Secka leaned down to grab a piece of fruit hidden in the shadows and threw it to him, his half-lidded gray eyes bored and nonchalant. “Enjoy.”

Jeb managed a weak smile and started to step forward to take the food, then froze.

A cold, dangerous snicker sounded from the shadows covering the back of the cavern. Secka glanced back with a bored sigh to see a red-furred outlaw step out from one of the cave dens at the back of the Spring and stalk toward him. “Sharing with the arsonist?” the outlaw mocked, raising an eyebrow.

Secka rolled his eyes and glanced back at him with an annoyed look. “Shut up. I’m not in the mood for you, so lay off. Besides,” he muttered with a bored flick of his tail, “everyone knows Jeb didn’t start the fire.”

The kraguer narrowed his eyes. “Says who?”

“Says me,” Jeb squeaked. A shiver raced down his spine and he shrank back in terror when the outlaw cast a disdainful glance in his direction.

Secka let out an annoyed sigh and glanced over to mutter to the outlaw, his voice as calm and unperturbed as always. “Jeb is a coward who’s afraid of his own shadow. Cowards don’t run around starting the forest on fire.”

Indignation made Jeb’s fur prickle at the insult, but when the other outlaw gave him a dangerous glare, he shrank back and didn’t say a word. His heart beat rapidly with fear and he prepared to run. Secka’s words hurt, but he knew they were true.

The red outlaw sighed and rolled his eyes. “Fine. I still don’t like him though.”

Secka snorted and glanced around him in boredom. “You don’t like anybody.”

“Is there any reason I should?” The criminal narrowed his eyes. “Everybody hates Zerone—even his own Empire—and all the criminals down here do is take up space and annoy me. You’re the worst one of the bunch, actually.”

“Fascinating,” Secka muttered, his monotonous voice tinged with sarcasm. “Maybe you should have thought about that before you committed a crime and got yourself exiled.” He raised his paw as he spoke and distractedly studied his sharp claws, as if the outlaw he was speaking to was barely worth his time.

The other criminal scoffed. “Look who’s talking! You’re a criminal, too, and you’re stuck down here just like the rest of us last time I checked!”

Secka just shrugged and flicked his tail uncaringly. “So? It’s not so bad down here. Now get back to your cave den. Talking to you is starting to bore me.”

The red kraguer gritted his teeth and narrowed his eyes in fury, but after a long moment, he finally let out a low growl and whirled around. Muttering under his breath, he stalked back toward one of the jagged holes at the back of the Spring and disappeared into the shadows, leaving Jeb and Secka alone.

Secka glanced at the place where the criminal had disappeared with raised eyebrows and rolled his eyes. “Whatever. I’m going back to my den to sleep. Night, Jeb.”

“Goodnight,” Jeb murmured softly, gazing distractedly down at his paws. After a long moment of hesitation, he glanced back at the moonlit hole leading into the upper world. His heart skipped in his chest at the thought of the upper world, but when he heard the sound of paws thudding against stone, he whipped around to face the gray outlaw. “Secka, wait! Is anyone up there?”

Secka paused and followed his gaze up to the hole leading into the world above. Looking back down to meet Jeb’s wide eyes, he shrugged nonchalantly. “As far as I know, there’s no one up there. I was just out a minute ago. All of Zerone’s kraguers are asleep by now and far away from here. They won’t catch you sneaking around up there.”

Jeb heaved a sigh of relief. “Okay, good. Thanks.”

Secka turned around and trailed off into the shadows. “If your parents freak out, I’ll tell them you went up for a while.”

Jeb glanced guiltily down at his paws. “Thanks, I guess. I just hope they don’t panic too much like they usually do.” He winced when he thought of the terror his parents felt at the thought of being caught up on the surface world by Emperor Zerone’s guards. Criminals were technically

supposed to stay in the Spring and *never* leave to visit the upper world, but no one ever paid attention to that law and no one bothered to enforce it. A tiny glimmer of fear burned in Jeb's chest at the thought of being seen in the upper world, but he pushed it away. The small risk of being up there was worth getting a breath of fresh air and getting away from the filthy grime of the underground for a few minutes.

Secka let out a tiny chuckle. "Your parents panic if a fly buzzes in their ear, but I'll try to keep their noise down so the other outlaws don't get mad."

Jeb tried not to wince and simply nodded. "Thanks."

Secka just shrugged and padded forward, vanishing into the darkness shrouding the cavern. Taking a deep breath, Jeb slowly turned around to stare out at the sparkling waters of the Spring, closed his eyes, and leapt forward. Shivers raced down his spine at the shock and sting of the sudden rush of freezing cold water washing over his body, but he ignored the chill spreading through him. Spreading out the webbing between his toes, he reached up with his paws and swam upward until his head finally broke the surface of the Spring. Gasping for air, he blinked water out of his eyes and paddled over to the tiny stretch of stone on the opposite side of the spring.

A cold wind breezed past him when he finally dug his claws into the stone on the other side and pulled himself up, but he tried not to shiver with cold. Shaking himself and sending droplets of water flying everywhere, he glanced up at the hole in the ceiling and leapt upward, digging his claws into the side of the hole. Narrowing his eyes, he struggled to pull himself up through the hole leading into the upper world and heaved a sigh when he finally hauled himself up over the edge and rolled onto the stiff green grass.

Towering trees rose up around him, forming a thick, dark canopy over his head. Pink, purple, green, and blue leaves rustled in a soft breeze, and the bright, shimmering moon above him cast a silvery glow down on the colorful trees. Orange, turquoise, white, and yellow bushes sprung up around the rough trunks of the trees and plants of every color of the rainbow grew up from the ground. The hard, cool green grass rose up high enough to brush his white belly. Shadows covered the woods around him, making shivers race up his spine when he wondered if Secka was mistaken

and some of Zerone's followers truly were hiding behind the enormous, rainbow-colored trees.

Taking a deep breath, Jeb closed his eyes and tried to relax. When he squeezed his eyes shut, he could still picture the terrifying images from his nightmare and the horrifying memories of everything that had happened just one year ago. The crackling, roaring sound of the fire seemed to echo in his ears as the images flashed through his mind. Through the darkness, he could still see the wild, eerie orange and red light of the blaze illuminating the yellow and black-striped fur of Zerone, the Emperor of the forest. The terror glowing in Zerone's bright green and ashen gray eyes seemed to burn into Jeb's mind, sending shivers racing through him.

Pushing away the memories of Emperor Zerone, he shuddered when a new image flashed through his mind. He remembered racing through the burning forest close beside his father, dodging away from the flickering flames and struggling to escape. His father's narrowed green eyes had glowed in determination with the sickening light of the flames. The roar of the fire still burned in his memory and the intense heat that had wafted over him made him suddenly break out in a cold sweat. Cries and screams seemed to echo from over a distance as the memory played out in his mind. He remembered leaping over a fallen tree with his father, racing toward the sound of a terrified cry, and stumbling into a clearing flickering with fire. The desperate, pleading look of Emperor Zerone burned in his mind when he remembered staggering forward with his father and freeing the Emperor's paw from where it had been trapped underneath a small fallen log.

A loud, thundering smack echoed in Jeb's mind when he remembered helping Telku pull Zerone free from where he had been trapped by the fallen tree and pushing him away. He winced when he remembered feeling a whoosh of air rustle his fur and looking back just in time to see a flaming tree crash down right in the place where the Emperor had stood only moments ago. The memories seemed to blur when he thought of how Zerone had bounded away and disappeared behind a wall of flickering flames.

Jeb's eyes shot open with fear and the echoing sound of crackling flames slowly began to die away, letting the clearing around him drift back into focus. Feelings of horror and dismay washed over him as strongly as

they had a year ago when he had burst out of the burning forest into an untouched, peaceful clearing and whirled around to see the flames billowing up, turning the sky into nothing but a cloud of ash. Hours had passed by before the fire was finally stopped, but once the smoke had cleared, the terrified kraguers had been quick to ask questions. Backed into a corner, the Emperor had been quick to blame the ones closest to him when the fire had started: Jeb and his Dad.

The next few days had passed by in a blur. Jeb's calm, peaceful home in Zerone's Court on the outskirts of the Emperor's mansion had become a land of hostility and accusations. In less than a week, a meeting had been held in Zerone's Royal Court in the plaza outside of his mansion. He and his father had been accused as guilty of starting the fire and sentenced to live in the Spring with the other outlaws for the rest of their lives. It had been their word against the word of the ruler of the forest. By the time the trial was even half over, everyone in Zerone's Court had turned against them and cheered for their exile. Keruni, Jeb's 'best friend,' had been the first to agree to his sentence and had simply laughed when he had been forced to leave. As the Emperor's daughter, she had instantly believed her father's accusations over his protests. To that day, the only ones who knew the truth about who truly started the fire were the outlaws in the Spring.

Why Zerone had started the fire in the first place or whether it was an accident or not, Jeb didn't know. All he knew was that he was trapped with a horde of outlaws for the rest of his life because of what he did.

Trying to shake off his bitter thoughts, he glanced around at the clearing and peered into the shadows behind the trees. Shivers raced through him. If he looked closely enough, he thought he could see a hint of light brown sand stretching out past his forest. The Land Beyond the Forest. The thought sent a wave of cold fear crashing over him, raising every hair on his back and making his heart beat faster with terror. Taking a deep breath, he tore his gaze away from the sand he imagined waiting just a few miles in front of him and tried to shake off the cold chills racing through his body. The idea of the lands waiting beyond their home terrified every kraguer. The forest around them was the only safe haven for his kind. To take one step outside their forest would be to die.

Shivering violently in the cold night air, he turned around to race back toward the underground to get out of the freezing surface world, then froze when he heard a soft rustling sound. Whirling around, his eyes grew wide with horror when he spotted a dense clump of undergrowth rustling just a few paces away from him. A tiny squeak of fear escaped his throat, and his legs turned to stone, freezing him with fear.

A mocking laugh cut through the peaceful silence of the night. "Still afraid of your own shadow, huh, Jeben?"

Jeb's eyes widened when he recognized the cold, high-pitched voice. Before he could speak or run, a tiny kraguer stepped out from the bushes, snickering and sneering.

"Still a scaredy-cat, I see." The kraguer's green eyes sparkled with amusement and arrogance as she sat back and smirked at Jeb. "You haven't changed much."

Jeb flattened his ears. "Shut up, Keruni! I'm not a scaredy-cat!"

She snickered and raised an eyebrow. "Sure you are!"

Jeb narrowed his eyes to protest, then sighed and let the insult die away. "Never mind," he muttered. "What are you doing out here anyway?"

She lashed her tail in a challenge. "What are you?"

He flattened his ears. "I asked first."

Keruni rolled her eyes. "What are we? Five? I'm here because I can go where I want. You, on the other hand, can't. Outlaws like you aren't allowed to leave the Spring."

Jeb's fur bristled in fury. "I shouldn't *be* an outlaw! I didn't do anything!"

Keruni rolled her eyes with a condescending sigh. "At this rate, you'll be saying that on your deathbed. You're such a liar, Jeb, and a bad one at that."

"Oh, you mean like Emperor Zerone?" he shot back, lashing his tail in anger.

She bristled and let out a cold hiss of fury. "My Daddy is not a liar! You are!"

Jeb let out an exasperated sigh. "If you believe that, you'll believe anything!"

Keruni snorted and flicked her tail with a flippant, condescending look. "Just give it up. Everyone knows you started that fire, so just drop it,



you traitor.”

Jeb winced. “You’re the traitor! You were the first one to agree to having me thrown out of Zerone’s Court and exiled to live with the outlaws just because Zerone said I should! Why did you listen to him? You were supposed to be my best friend!”

“My Daddy’s always right, so why shouldn’t I have listened to him?” Keruni sniffed. “And we were never friends. I just hung out with you when I was bored.” She shook her head in disgust as Jeb gaped at her in disbelief. “‘Best friends.’ Ha! You were a worthless friend. Whenever something made a sound, you would run and hide! If something bad happened, you would just cower under a bush and leave me to get hurt!”

Jeb’s eyes widened in shock as sharp pain stabbed into his heart. Shaking his head desperately, he faced Keruni and gritted his teeth. “That—that’s not true!”

She smirked and let out a cold, humorless snicker in her high, lofty voice. “Sure it is. Who would want to be friends with a dumb, pathetic coward like you?”

Jeb blinked and shook his head, trying to push back the sting of tears and the memories flashing through his mind. Taking a deep breath, he stumbled past her, trying to block out the grief rising in his chest. “Forget it, Keruni. I have to get back to the Spring.”

Keruni sniffed and glanced over her shoulder when he stumbled past her. “Really? So what’s it like living with the scum of the forest?”

Jeb winced and gritted his teeth, freezing in his tracks and feeling a surge of anger overwhelm the sorrow in his chest. Not bothering to turn around, he stood rigidly in place and let out a cold hiss. “You know, Keruni...it’s a lot like being with you.” Without waiting for her reply, he turned away from her and leapt into the hole leading into the Spring. Guilt burned in his chest only seconds after he had bolted away from her, making his heart skip with regret and grief. Trying to shake it off and ignore the guilt, he sat back against the cold stone and heaved a sigh. He seemed to sag with tiredness and exhaustion and he longed to get back to his den and fall asleep, but a tiny part of him knew that his own regret would keep him awake. Letting out another long sigh, he took a deep breath and turned to face the darkness around him.

When he woke up the next morning, he would remember the night as the night he had a painful run-in with his enemy. In the future, he would remember it as the night before the creatures invaded.

Stars twinkled in the black night sky miles away, shining down on a lone animal trudging painfully across a bleak landscape. His head sagged and his paws felt heavy with exhaustion, but he forced himself to keep moving, desperate to find the ones he missed. Some part of him wondered if he would ever see them again or if they had already moved on and he was searching for no reason, but the other part of him refused to stop. Even if they had forgotten him, he could never forget them. Searching for them to make sure they had found a safer home and better luck was all he had left.

Other worries nagged at his mind with every step he took. As if his own nostalgia wasn't bad enough, he was starting to find it a bit difficult to hide from the ones who hated him so strongly. Avoiding them was a priority. If he slipped up and got caught, his death was all but assured, and this time it would be permanent. To make his suffering worse, food was getting harder and harder to find and the thought of trying to take food from around the homes of his enemies was anything but assuring.

Letting out a soft sigh, he glanced down at the journal tied around his neck and wondered what the animals he missed so badly thought of him. Were they upset by his fate? Or had they recovered and gone on with their lives? Feeling a tingle of pain and guilt, he hoped they were smart enough to leave his memory behind. They would have enough to deal with without having to mourn over what might have happened to him.

He padded wearily onward, wandering alone through an endless expanse of barren land and thinking about the animals he missed. Deep down he wondered if he should give up and leave them alone. He had already done enough and a tiny voice in his head whispered that they wouldn't care about seeing him again. Trying to ignore the voice and the grief prickling his fur, he pushed the thoughts away and forced himself to take another step. Even if they didn't want to see him, he had to check up on them. He could always leave after he was sure they were all right and continue wandering alone. Forever.

A tiny hint of loneliness haunted him, but spending hours upon hours and days upon days alone didn't bother him too much. What bothered

him was the guilt that filled the emptiness left by the never-ending silence. With every step he took, every breath he breathed, and every memory he tried to relive, the guilt haunted him, tormenting him without mercy or any hope of stopping. The guilt was his only companion in his lonesome journey in daylight and his only shelter at night. Sleep seemed to always be just beyond his grasp. Not a single moment passed by without his conscience reminding him of his horrible deeds, but he accepted the guilt. He knew he deserved it.

Despite his best efforts to overcome his own self-hatred, his mind was constantly riddled with guilt and grief. Not a moment passed by without him remembering the past. Every day he replayed what he had done over and over again, seeing the terrified look in the amber eyes beneath him a thousand times and experiencing the taste of his brother's blood in his mouth as if he had done that horrible deed all over again.

# Chapter Two

## A New Home

“Dingo.” A whimper breathed out of Saderia’s chest. The sharp, stony edges of the rocky bed below her dug into her back as she stared listlessly up at the ceiling. The brown roof above her was plain and answerless. She let out a sad sigh and felt a tiny tear slide down her cheek as she thought of her lost friend. A month had passed since he had been killed and Saderia and Dash had followed Makero to their new home.

Even though days had passed, Saderia had never stopped thinking about her lost friend. She had never stopped hoping that somehow he had managed to get away from the dingoes. She had never stopped wishing that somehow she would see him again. For days, she had struggled to not think thoughts like that. They just got her hopes up and hurt her again when she forced herself to realize that she would never see him again.

She knew she had failed in trying to help him. The sharp sting of failure still haunted her every day. Memories of how she had promised him that they would stay with him and help him and how they would let him come live with them burned in her mind. All of her great hopes and plans had been destroyed by the dingoes. Every dingo in the pack had blood on their paws for what they had done to him, yet she probably felt guiltier than any of them. Why hadn’t she known that something horrible was about to happen when Dingo had told them to run when the pack was standing right in front of him, shocked about Bone’s death? Why had she believed him when he had said he would ‘catch up to them?’ Dingo had known what was going to happen. Why couldn’t she see it was a lie? Why hadn’t she been a better friend?

Dingo shouldn’t have died. He was supposed to be part of the prophecy that supposedly dictated her life. But now she wasn’t even sure about that anymore. Why would she be prophesized to do such great things if she let her friends die? What good was her great Dream sense when it let things like this happen? Even as the miserable thoughts swirled around in

her head, she couldn't help but remember how horrible Dingo's life had been out in the desert. A shudder ran down her spine when she thought of Bone, the cold, sadistic dingo who had tormented his younger brother, Dingo, for years. After all that Dingo had been through, maybe he was better off dead. Pain seared her chest at the thought, but as much as it hurt to think it, she couldn't help but believe it. Maybe now that he had finally gotten even with Bone, it was time for him to rest.

She heaved a long, sad sigh. Even if it was true, she had hoped that she would at least see him in one of her Dreams, like she had with Claw. Long ago, Dingo's dead sister, Claw, had come to visit her in a Dream back when her brother was alive. As far as she knew, Saderia was the only one who could see ghosts, and Claw had offered to help her. When she had woken up, she hadn't told Dash, Dingo, or anybody about the experience, deciding it was too early to tell them something as shocking as that. After Dingo had died, she had wondered if she would see Claw again and if Dingo would be with her this time, but so far she hadn't seen either of them, either awake or asleep.

Was Dingo with his sister now? If he was, why hadn't she gotten some kind of sign to prove it to her? Trying to shake off a sting of sadness, she wondered if they hadn't visited her because now that Claw and Dingo were reunited, they didn't need to bother with her. Maybe that was it. If it was, she didn't care, as long as Dingo was happy. She just wished she could be sure that he was with Claw as a ghost now.

*The daughter of the fiftieth generation of the royal family will be gifted with the Power of Dreams stronger than any member of the royal family before her. Her spirit will light the way to a bright, marvelous future. Her soul will guide her through her destined path, and will help lost souls find themselves again. She will be expected to handle her Power responsibly and wisely, and do what she believes is best. The hardships she will face will give her strength. She will go on to do many great things, and Heart, Crown, Scepter, Eye, and Dreams will help and guide her.*

The words of the ancient royal prophecy whisked through her mind, leaving her feeling empty and hollow. Was it all just a lie? She had thought she was helping Dingo like the prophecy wanted, but in the end she had just led him to his death. He had died trying to protect her and Dash. If they hadn't tried to 'help,' would he still be alive?

“The hardships I will face will give me strength,” she muttered. Yeah, right. She didn’t feel any stronger than she did when Dingo was alive before this *hardship* had happened. If anything, she felt much weaker now that she had lost so much. Her peaceful forest, her tranquil home was long gone, left to be destroyed by the hunters that had invaded and forced her to leave. Her family and the other forest animals had been left behind when she and Dash had gotten lost in the desert and had only recently reunited with her. Now Dingo was gone. The only thing she had left now was Dash, her family, and the forest animals. She felt grateful to have them, but even then, they weren’t themselves. Ever since they had come to the new forest, they had changed. Bits of their old personality had been lost in the face of a new forest that would never ever be home.

The new forest her parents, the King and Queen, had discovered while she and Dash were lost, was hardly any comfort and nothing like her old, true home. Apart from the desert, it was the strangest place she had ever been, and she didn’t like living there anymore than she had liked being lost in the desert for over a month. Odd, mysterious problems seemed to be hiding under every bush and lurking behind every tree.

The soft sound of paw steps thudding against stone drew her out of her thoughts. Looking up, she saw Dash pad into the jagged entrance of her room. A light grin spread across the lion’s face as she stepped closer, making Saderia feel a tiny tingle of relief. Dash was the only one she knew she could talk to about anything that was troubling her; he would always understand her. She could trust him with her life despite the fact that his father was the dark, evil lion named Dastarius, who had kidnapped her parents ten long years ago. After all that had happened recently, none of that mattered anymore.

Dash’s amber eyes gleamed with worry. “Saderia? Are you okay?”

She heaved a long sigh and reluctantly sat up. “I was thinking... about Dingo.”

Dash’s amber eyes clouded with grief. “I can’t stop thinking about him either.”

She looked away. “It’s all my fault, Dash. I should have done something.”

Dash let out a soft sigh. “You sound like he did.”

Saderia winced and looked down. When she closed her eyes, she could still hear Dingo's sad voice in her head, muttering about how Claw's death was his fault when he was far from the one who had caused it.

"Just like it wasn't his fault Claw died, it wasn't your fault Dingo died. It was the pack's doing, and you know it," Dash murmured, giving her a stern look.

She gritted her teeth. "But we should have done something, not just left."

Dash took a deep breath. "That's what he wanted us to do. What could we have done up against eight dingoes? They could have sent for more at any time too. If we had stayed, we would all be dead. Do you think he would have wanted that?"

Saderia winced and turned away, squeezing her eyes shut and avoiding his gaze.

After a brief hesitation, Dash bunched his muscles and leapt up onto the bed to sit down close beside her. His dark brown tail swished anxiously back and forth and his eyes narrowed in pain and sympathy. "I miss Dingo, too, but there's nothing we could have done. We have to go on with our lives just like he did after Claw died."

She winced and met his eyes. "But...but I thought he was part of the prophecy."

Dash let out a long, heavy sigh. "Maybe he wasn't."

"But my instinct was never wrong...until Dingo died." Her heart suddenly burned with pain. "Maybe my intuition was off the whole time we were in the desert."

"That's not true," Dash said firmly, narrowing his eyes. "Your instinct has never been wrong. We *did* help Dingo when he was alive and your instinct helped us do that. You can't let this destroy what you believe in." He hesitated, then stared down at his paws and let out a sigh. "You can't possibly foresee everything that's going to happen."

"But I should be able to!" Her amber eyes suddenly blazed with fury and she looked up to glare at him. "That's what my Dreams are for, aren't they? Or was I mistaken? Was this whole prophecy nothing but a stupid mistake?"

"No," Dash said sternly, resting his paw over hers. "I miss Dingo as much as you do...I was so sure that he would be our friend and come live

with us in our new home, that everything would be all right...but it wasn't. But that doesn't mean we should just give up. We're in the new forest now and things aren't looking too great."

Saderia curled her lip. "What else is new?"

"They need their Princess," he insisted with a calm flick of his tail. "Just as much as they need their King and Queen. Don't you remember how relieved they were when you came back with me and Makero a month ago? They need you to help them settle into this new home and turn it into everything our old home was."

Saderia snorted in disgust. "This place will never be home."

Dash opened his mouth to protest, then looked down with a sigh, unable to deny it. The glimmer of doubt and uncertainty in his amber eyes told her he knew it was true.

The forest itself was fairly big, but it was surrounded on all sides by desert sand as if it had popped up out of nowhere, unlike their old, enormous forest that spread out in all directions for miles so that nobody knew where it ended. Within the forest, the terrain got even weirder. Strange, alien plants cropped up around every corner of the forest, marring a would-be peaceful woods with odd flowers with purple leaves and green petals, upside-down trees with roots jutting upward like branches, and many other eerie, vividly colorful plants. Even the grass seemed strange. Varying in shades of green, white, blue, purple, and every color imaginable, the stiff, bristly stalks grew wild, covering every inch of the forest with tall, rough grass. Rivers and lakes dotted the forest and were dyed an ominous, murky blue rather than the clear, light blue color of the rivers within her old home.

So far the forest seemed not only abandoned but empty of any life at all. The forest animals hadn't come across any other animals and there were no traces of anyone ever having lived there before. No paw steps sounded in the silent woods, no paw prints were found imprinted in patches of dirt, and not even birdsong could be heard through the tomb-like silence of the forest. It seemed as though the forest had never once been discovered by anyone in the past. Or maybe others had just had the sense to stay away.

Dens and places to live were few and far between. The forest animals had to start all over from scratch to build the forest back into what the old one had been. Dens were one of the many things they needed to



make. Sometimes they discovered huge rock formations big enough to use as dens, but even those were scarce.

Saderia's own den was a huge, vertical rock formation with a wide, gaping opening they used as an entrance and four other jagged openings leading into Saderia's room, Dash's room, Karenisha and Makero's room, and Cia and Uncle Jash's room. Their beds were made out of rock and softened by a leafy covering they had gathered from the trees. Even with a soft blanket of leaves covering the hard bed, the rough, rocky edges still jabbed into their sides and kept them awake. It was a lot like being out in the desert and sleeping on rocks like the dingoes had done. In the center of the rocky den was a couch made out of rocks stacked together and softened by leaves facing the entrance of the den; a few tall, craggy boulders used as counters behind it; and a long, rocky stone slab used as a table for eating in between the couch and the counters.

Fruit grew plentifully on the trees outside and though it tasted a bit odd, it seemed safe. The rivers were a different story. Collecting water from the lakes and rivers scattered throughout the forest was deadly. Every drop of water in the lakes they had discovered was tainted with some kind of strange poison that could kill an animal if they drank too much. Instead of collecting the poisonous water, Saderia had convinced the forest animals to use the dingoes' method of collecting water by putting out pots during a storm to catch the rainwater. When Saderia and Dash had returned to the forest, Karenisha had told them there used to be an old underground spring with clean, fresh water untainted by poison where all the forest animals had collected water, but the spring had mysteriously dried up before she and Dash had found their way to the new forest.

The oddities of the forest were strange, but for the most part, easily ignored. By far the worst part were the disasters. Natural pitfalls were hidden under dense brush all over the forest. Geysers erupted randomly throughout the woods, singeing the fur off any animal unlucky enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The rivers were the strangest of all. Without warning, they would flood out of their river bed and destroy anything in their path until a new riverbed formed and the water settled again. Living in their 'new home' was getting more and more dangerous as more time passed by.

"We're just going to have to get used to it," Dash murmured.

Saderia looked down at her paws and heaved a sigh. "Or find somewhere else."

"And go on another journey like the one through the desert? No thanks."

Gazing at her paws, she opened her mouth to agree, then broke off at the sound of paw steps and looked up. Outlined by the jagged edges surrounding the entrance to her room stood Queen Karenisha and King Makero. A faint light gleamed in their eyes.

"Saderia, Dash," Karenisha said with a slight smile. "You're up."

With a slight nod, the two hopped off the bed and landed on the cold stone floor. Looking up at the King and Queen, they silently padded over to them, a question glimmering in their amber eyes. When they stood in front of the two regal tigers, Saderia caught a glimpse of orange fur and watched as her Aunt Cia and Uncle Jash crept up from behind Karenisha and Makero. Worry glimmered in the bright blue eyes of the two tigers.

"What's going on?" Saderia asked, glancing from her parents to her aunt and uncle and frowning in confusion. "Are we checking on another part of the forest again?"

"Yes, we're going to check on the leopards," Makero explained. "Cia and Jash are going to stay here in case anyone needs something. Are you two coming or staying?"

"We're coming with you, of course." Saderia instantly stepped closer to them. No matter how creepy it was, she wanted to explore every inch of her so-called 'new home.'

Karenisha smiled slightly and glanced over at her adopted son. "Dash?"

"I'll go where Saderia goes," he replied with a worried gleam in his amber eyes.

"All right, we had better get moving." The Queen glanced around at the two of them and flicked her fluffy tail to signal for them to follow her. With one last worried glance around at them, she turned around and padded out of the room, giving Jash and her twin sister a tight smile when they parted to let her into the main room of the den.

Makero instantly fell into step beside her, and Saderia and Dash trotted behind, calling a last farewell to Cia and Uncle Jash as they passed by. Padding across the rocky floor of the main part of the den and skirting

around the dark, stony couch, Saderia followed her mother to the gaping entrance of the den leading out into the rest of the forest and stopped on the edge of her den to stare out into the world around her.

Puffy bushes of pink, green, blue, and hundreds of other colors stretched out in front of her. Leafy branches in every color of the rainbow hung over the entrance of the den, rustling against the stone and casting speckled shadows over the dark green grass. Beyond the tiny clearing surrounding her home stood a dark labyrinth of trees and bushes. Purple weeds with bright red thorns wound up the hard bark of the trees, climbing toward the pink, orange, green, and blue leaves as if to grab them.

Saderia looked around at the woods as she stepped out of the den, trying to ignore the sharp, prickly touch of the stiff grass beneath her. The forest in front of her would have seemed magical or even beautiful if she didn't know any better. Disasters and strange, disturbing oddities lurked behind the bright, colorful face of the woods. Ducking into the woods surrounding the clearing and thinking about the dangers hiding in the forest, she was more worried about getting through it than stopping to observe.

Thick brambles and sharp thorns tugged at her fur, dragging her back and clawing at her skin. Saderia gritted her teeth and forced herself to keep moving. A wave of homesickness crashed over her as she moved deeper into the wild, colorful woods. Back in her old forest she had had a clear dirt path leading to town and other paths leading to other neighborhoods, towns, or schools. Even the woods in the old forest had been less dense and easier to navigate. She had always overlooked the paths. Now she missed them. She even felt herself missing the desert sand; at least it didn't prick or stab her.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed away her thoughts and spared a glance up ahead before gazing back down at her paws. Pushing past a tangle of thick branches, she tried not to think about the woods around her. As they kept moving, Saderia felt a flash of resentment toward herself. What was wrong with her? Why did she feel so helpless and hopeless when she should be doing her best to build this place up and help everyone else adjust? The others were having just as hard of a time as she was. "Don't be so selfish," she muttered to herself. "You're not the only one hurting here."

No one seemed to hear her, although when she glanced to the side, she could see Dash staring at her in concern, his amber eyes burning with

worry. Had he guessed how hopeless she felt? How lost she was? Feeling a tang of sorrow, she almost chuckled bitterly to herself at the thought. Why did she feel more lost in this strange forest, even with everyone else here with her, than she had in the desert?

Karenisha glanced back at them and for one brief second, her eyes met Saderia's. Understanding flashed in the Queen's amber irises, but before Saderia could try to read the emotions on her face, she turned back around to face Makero. "You and Dash take the lead," Karenisha whispered, giving him a soft flick of her tail.

Makero frowned and cast a glance back at Saderia. After a slight hesitation, he nodded and signaled for Dash to join him farther ahead. Dash hesitated even longer and gave Saderia a nervous look before padding forward to join the King. As soon as the two had gotten a few feet away, Karenisha fell behind to pad alongside her daughter. "I know something's wrong," she murmured, giving her a sideways glance. "So start talking."

Saderia sighed. "I can never hide anything from you."

She smiled weakly. "Now you know how Dash feels when you read his mind."

Saderia tried to smile, but her dark, dull eyes didn't match her mouth. Letting her fake smile fade, she heaved another heavy sigh. "What *isn't* wrong?"

Karenisha blinked in surprise. "What do you mean? We have a new home and the animals are starting to settle in. Sure, there are some problems..." She paused and gave her daughter a stern look. "But I didn't think you would have expected us to find a new home that was the mirror image of our old one, in perfect shape without any obstacles."

"I didn't." Saderia let out a long sigh and looked down. "But...I just...I expected it to be better than this. I knew it would be bad, but not this bad. And I knew it would be hard to get to our new home, but not as hard as it was."

Her eyes narrowed in understanding. "You're not talking about getting lost."

Saderia heaved another sigh and stared at her paws. "No."

"You're talking about Dingo." Sympathy gleamed in her amber eyes and she slowly looked up to meet Saderia's gaze.

Pain seared her chest and she looked away, gritting her teeth to push back tears. "I just...I failed, all right! I don't know what to do! I didn't know it would turn out like this! It *shouldn't* have turned out like this!" She tore at the ground with her claws. "If I'm supposed to be so special like the prophecy said, then why did I fail? Why did he die?"

Karenisha let out a long, heavy breath. "Saderia, it's not your fault. You know that. You have to accept that."

"It is my fault!" She shook her head desperately. "You don't understand!"

Karenisha rested her tail gently on her shoulder. "I do understand. And I think you misunderstood the prophecy. You aren't automatically born knowing everything you need to know. You have to learn more as you go along just like everybody else."

Saderia gritted her teeth and let out a hiss. "Then why is there even a prophecy?"

"Because you are still special. You do have the capabilities to do all that it said, and we've seen that. But it also said you would need to learn how to deal with hardships and failure." Her amber eyes grew dull with sadness. "It's just a part of life, Saderia."

Saderia whipped around and gaped in disbelief. "Letting somebody die...?!"

"Death is a part of life. There's nothing we can do about that. And you didn't *let* anybody die." Karenisha gave her a stern look. "You're right. It should have turned out differently. But it didn't. And you have to move on and accept it. Any great Queen knows they have to go through tough times. It's something you'll always have to deal with. You've never had to learn how to accept something like this; you have to learn now."

"But why? Did the prophecy do this?" Saderia gaped at her in horror. "Did the prophecy do this to 'make me learn something?!'"

Karenisha shook her head calmly. "The prophecy didn't do anything. This just happened and no one's to blame. *You* are the one that controls your life, not the prophecy, not anyone else. And you control how you feel. I know you miss him and I know you feel bad, but it's not your fault. Life goes on."

"I can't believe you're counting someone's death as just something to learn from, something to do better at *next time*!" Saderia gritted her teeth

and spat in disgust. “As if their life never really mattered, as if it was only there for me to *learn from!*”

Karenisha let out a long sigh. “One day, you’ll see. I’ll leave you alone now. I’m here if you need to talk and you always have Dash.”

Saderia looked up as her mother pushed her way ahead and tried to ignore a wave of guilt. Karenisha might be able to sense some of what she was feeling, but she couldn’t understand all of it. How could anyone understand how it felt to be the one who had run away and left her friend to be killed? How could anyone understand leaving their friend behind when they were supposed to save him?

Glancing back at Saderia, Dash hesitated, then fell behind and trailed backwards to stand beside her, letting Karenisha and Makero take the lead. Padding along beside her, he watched her for a long time, his eyes gleaming with concern. “Is everything okay?”

“Shut up,” she snapped, lashing her tail in fury. The instant the words left her mouth she felt a sharp jolt of guilt and pain and nearly winced at the horrible feeling. How could she tell her closest friend to shut up just for asking if she was okay?

Dash blinked in surprise. “Sorry,” he muttered, looking down at his paws.

Burning with regret, she longed to apologize, but the words died away in her throat. Biting her lip, she turned away with a sad sigh and continued walking toward the Home of the Leopards. What could she say to excuse herself anyway?

“All right, everybody get to work and no slacking!” Maeta’s loud, commanding voice echoed around the clearing. “We’ve got to build up the Home of the Leopards!”

Saderia heaved a sigh as she pushed aside a clump of purple bushes beside her family. Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward and paused when the dense woods fell away to the sides, revealing the wide clearing of the Home of the Leopards.

Dozens of tiny rock dens were scattered around the wide, grassy clearing. Small piles of wood were stacked on the edges of the neighborhood near small, half-built wooden dens. Only a few of the tiny wooden houses had been started around the clearing, but the leopards

already seemed to be running out of what limited resources they had been given. Orange, spotted animals padded tirelessly back and forth across the clearing, carrying wide boards and swarming around the half-built houses to build them up into a den. Other leopards stood near their own rocky dens, chewing on small pieces of fruit and watching curiously. The eyes of the leopards all gleamed with determination.

A tawny, yellowish blur streaked through the clearing toward animals in need of help. Saderia smiled faintly when she recognized who it was.

Maeta turned in the center of the clearing and narrowed her eyes. "Loki!"

The yellow blur instantly turned and skidded to a halt in front of the leader of the leopards. Grinning, Loki looked up at Maeta with gleaming green eyes. "Yes, Maeta?"

Maeta faced her and frowned. "Can I trust you to check the river and be careful?"

"Of course," Loki replied, standing up straighter. "Anything else I can do?"

Maeta nodded firmly. "Yes, I need you to go into the woods to look for fruit and give it to Marlina and anyone else who needs it."

Loki's eyes softened and her tail drooped with sympathy. "How is your sister?"

"She's doing fine," Maeta murmured. "She's still upset...but she's doing better."

Loki nodded thoughtfully. "And her cub?"

"It's due any day now, but we can't tell when for sure. Hopefully she'll be well enough to have a safe birth."

Out of the corner of her eye, Saderia saw her mother take a step farther into the clearing. Tearing her eyes off of Loki, Saderia slowly trailed after her parents into the center of the clearing, feeling her paws slip onto the sparse, thin grass of the clearing.

"Greetings, Maeta," Karenisha called, waving her tail in greeting and stopping in front of her and Loki. "I hope we aren't interrupting anything."

Maeta pricked her ears and turned to face them with a smile. "No, Queen Karenisha. I suppose you've come to find out what's been going on

here?”

“Yes,” Makero replied, stepping up beside Karenisha. “Any problems?”

Maeta shook her head. “None so far, but we are a bit worried about a river close by here. It hasn’t done much, but you know how all the rivers flood. We’ve spotted a few pitfalls, but it’s nothing to fret about. As you can see, we’re trying to build houses.”

“I’m glad all is going well,” Karenisha said, sounding relieved. She glanced back as Saderia and Dash crept up to stand beside them and gave them a slight smile. “You two can go talk to Loki and the others to find out what’s going on. We’ll stay here to work some things out with Maeta to try to help the leopards.”

Saderia nodded and gave Loki a weak smile. Giving a slight wave to her parents with her tail, she stepped forward and padded toward the edge of the clearing, leading Dash and Loki away to a quiet spot to talk.

Loki gave her a slight grin when they sat back against the stiff grass on the edge of the woods by a thick clump of undergrowth. “So what’s been going on with you?”

Saderia shrugged and glanced to the side as Dash sat down beside her and gave her a gentle flick of his tail, as if she hadn’t been so rude before. Feeling bad at how quick Dash was to forgive her, she sighed and looked down at her paws. “Not much. You?”

“The same.” She paused for a moment and opened her mouth to say something, then broke off and looked away, a frown spreading across her face.

Dash frowned in concern. “Something wrong?”

She just sighed. “Marlina. She’s still upset about...Hateko.”

A deep shiver unconsciously shot down Saderia’s spine as she thought about Marlina’s husband. She could still see the sharp, horrifying image of him staggering out of the woods back in her old forest when she closed her eyes. In silence, she could still hear the loud, booming shot of the hunter’s gun when they killed him. His wide, desperate green stare still burned in her mind and when she thought back to that awful moment, she could still hear his agonized cry echoing through the forest.

“How are you and your family doing?” Loki murmured, changing the subject and looking lost in her own thoughts.



Saderia blinked and shook the thoughts away, ignoring the lingering chill they had brought. “We’re...okay,” she murmured bleakly. “Things are going pretty well. We’re usually out a lot, checking on the forest, but sometimes Mom and Dad go alone and stay out for a long time. They have to go all over the forest to talk to the animals and get things fixed and they’re still trying to work out a way to cope with these disasters.”

Loki nodded slowly, then looked up with narrowed, sympathetic green eyes. “Are you still upset about that Dingo thing you told us about?”

Saderia tried not to wince. When she and Dash had first come to the forest after grueling weeks of being lost, her parents had called a meeting to announce their safe return. She could just barely remember looking out and seeing the relieved faces of the forest animals staring up at her. The blank, grief-stricken eyes of her best friend and the agony in her heart were the only things she could vividly remember when she had told the forest animals about her journey with Dingo. At the end, everyone had seemed sorry for her, but none of them could understand how much Dingo’s death had destroyed her. They hadn’t been the ones he had saved or the ones who had left him behind.

Dash narrowed his eyes with worry when he saw the dark look on her face. “Hey, where’s Lisa?” he asked, changing the subject. “Don’t you normally play with her?”

“Yeah, she’s around,” Loki replied with a shrug, looking relieved to be off the subject. “We’re just always busy with building up the Home of the Leopards, so we don’t see each other as much.” She glanced back at the swarm of leopards in the center of the clearing and called out, “Lisa! Saderia and Dash are here!”

One of the many spotted animals milling around in the middle of the clearing looked up and pricked her ears in surprise, then smiled, her grayish blue eyes lighting up with excitement. “Hi, Saderia. Hi, Dash,” Lisa said shyly, darting toward them and sitting down in front of them.

“Hi, Lisa,” Saderia said. “We came here with our parents to see how things were going. How have things been around here?”

Lisa shrugged. “They’ve been all right. There were a few pitfalls around here, but it was nothing too bad. We’re more worried about the river.” She paused, then added. “You guys are working on this, right? I mean, it’s hard to live like this.”

Saderia looked away with an uncertain shrug, unsure of how to answer.

“We’re working on it,” Dash spoke up with a comforting smile. “We’ve got lots of animals making things we had in the old forest, and we’re trying to figure out how the disasters work and how to stop them. It’ll be fine.” His voice sounded soothing and assured. It was nothing like the dark, worried murmur he used when he and Saderia were talking. By the relieved look on Lisa’s face, Saderia could tell that she believed what he said.

Why couldn’t she be like that when her forest needed her? A flash of bitterness and anger at herself nearly made her wince. She was the Princess; she was supposed to be reassuring the animals like Dash, not clamming up and letting them panic.

She sighed, then paused when a loud roar echoed from across the clearing. The four of them whirled around in surprise and spotted a large, powerful leopard standing next to the King and Queen, staring sternly back at them and flicking her tail in a signal for them to come closer. Loki glanced back at her friends, then whipped around and darted toward the leopard leader at top speed with Saderia, Dash, and Lisa following hastily behind her. The cheetah skidded to a halt just in front of the three important animals and looked up expectantly.

“Yes, Maeta? And Queen Karenisha and King Makero?”

Maeta spared a glance at Saderia, Dash, and Lisa as they skidded to a stop behind Loki, then looked back down to meet the shining green eyes of the cheetah. “A cheetah neighborhood is almost done building its houses,” she explained. “They said they’d be happy to help anyone, and the King and Queen think it’s good for all the animals to help each other. I need you to go to the cheetahs to see if some would come to help us here.”

“The breeds should work together,” Loki said with a grin. “I totally agree.” She glanced over at a cheetah and a leopard working on one of the houses, making Saderia realize that they were her parents and reminding her of Loki’s half-leopard, half-cheetah heritage. “I’ll be over to the cheetahs and back as quick as possible.”

“Don’t get too cocky,” Maeta warned. “Slow down enough to watch out for any hazards like floods, pitfalls, and geysers.”

“Don’t worry, Maeta, I’ll be fine. I’ll be back soon.” Casting a glance around at the others, she gave Saderia and Dash a quick wave before racing off toward the entrance of the Home of the Leopards clearing at top speed. Saderia blinked, and when she opened her eyes, Loki had already disappeared behind the colorful wall of forest trees in a blur of yellow and tawny spots.

Karenisha smiled and looked down at Saderia and Dash. “It’s time for us to go, too. You two should get home now. Makero and I have some other things we need to check on, but we’ll pass by the house in a few hours and Cia and Jash will be there to look out for you in the meantime.”

Saderia nodded silently and flicked her tail toward Dash, signaling for him to follow her. He gave her a weak smile and cautiously followed behind her as she led the way into the multicolor labyrinth of bushes and trees that formed the woods between her home and the Home of the Leopards, hoping she could remember the way. Thoughts of how she had acted at the leopards’ neighborhood burned in her mind, haunting her every step. Why had she been so unable or even unwilling to reassure the forest animals? Why had she left it all up to Dash? A dull feeling of helplessness nagged at her. Ever since she had failed to help Dingo, it felt like she couldn’t do anything anymore. Her heart sank with hopelessness. Letting out a sigh, she faced the forest and tried to focus on finding her way back to her den. In her mind, she could suddenly picture the hard, rocky edges of her house and the rough, cold stone of her bed. It wasn’t her home.

Visiting the Home of the Leopards and talking to Loki and Lisa had made life seem almost normal. Passing by bright, impossible blue, pink, and yellow bushes and thinking of her den reminded her that it wasn’t and never would be normal again.

She had failed the forest and she had failed the prophecy. How could anything be normal after that?

# Chapter Three

## Hiding

“We can’t go to Zerone for help!”

The cold, disgusted voice of one of the outlaws rose above the others. Furious snarls rang out around the Spring in agreement, echoing around the stony cavern.

A low, dangerous growl sounded above the earsplitting shouts of the others. “It’s not like that pathetic excuse of an Emperor can do anything to help us anyway! That halfwit can barely figure out how to get up in the morning, much less rule an Empire!”

Shouts and cries of agreement erupted among the outlaws, causing all of them to raise their voices in a loud roar. The entire main part of the Spring was filled with every single criminal that lived down in the underground cavern. Moonlight shimmered down from the hole in the ceiling leading up to the surface world, casting an eerie silver glow over the fur of the kraguers. The pale gray stone floor was hidden underneath the shadowed yellow, red, brown, and pale fur of the kraguers and matched by the gray fur of one particular outlaw. Secka sat against the wall of the Spring closest to Jeb’s cave den, watching the outlaws with bored gray eyes and a twitching, black-tufted tail. The other criminals filled up every nook and cranny of the cavern, muttering anxiously or snarling at each other. Their eyes gleamed with fury and unease in the dim light. Claws scraped roughly across the stony floor, and the air in the Spring felt unnaturally hot and humid.

Jeb crouched fearfully on the edge of the basin that used to hold sparkling, light blue water. What used to be a beautiful, crystal-like pool had been drained by the outlaws into nothing more than a cracked stone basin. Dirt, damp green slime, and dying mold and moss covered the bottom of the dry basin, creeping upward to touch the sides of the rocky floor. Shivers raced down Jeb’s spine as he watched the outlaws snarl at each other and hovered closer to his father. Terror seemed to make every

inch of his body freeze and tense and no matter how hard he tried to relax, the cold sense of fear lingered. Gazing out at the enormous crowd of criminals, he suddenly felt tiny and vulnerable. The thought of being alone against all the outlaws in the Spring made him feel almost faint.

Biting his lip, he couldn't help but look back across the drained basin at the hole in the ceiling. A violent shudder racked his body when he spotted the green grass growing just above the underground. Weeks had passed by and no kraguer had dared to set foot outside the Spring even to get food. The surface world above them had been invaded almost a month ago by strange, eerie creatures they had never seen before. Enormous creatures with orange fur and black stripes or creamy fur and wild brown fur growing around their necks walked the land above them, along with hundreds of other disturbing creatures with huge claws and enormous teeth. Even after weeks had passed by, they hadn't left. From the looks of it, they might never leave.

Jeb trembled in terror. Dangerous outlaws were gathered in front of him, but horrifying creatures walked in the world just above him. Nowhere was safe.

Trying to shake off the cold fear making his heart beat frantically in his chest, Jeb took a shaky breath and gazed out at the outlaws. A desperate meeting to figure out what to do about the strange creatures that had invaded their home had been called just a few hours before, drawing every criminal out of their cave den and into the open. Over the past few hours, no one had been able to come up with any idea that could help them. Every kraguer seemed just as clueless and terrified as the next.

The frantic murmuring and snarling of the crowd grew louder and louder until a dull roar echoed through the Spring. Flattening his ears, Jeb shivered and looked around wildly, feeling his heart skip with fear when he spotted the fury glimmering in the eyes of some of the criminals. He watched the outlaws nervously, then looked toward the wall of the underground cavern when he caught sight of movement. His eyes widened with curiosity and unease when he saw Secka let out a long sigh and slowly step away from the wall. Shoving his way into the center of the crowd, the gray outlaw let out a loud, deafening snarl that forced the voices of the others to die away in surprise.

“All right, everyone shut up and listen,” he growled, his tail twitching lightly back and forth and his gray eyes glinting in the dim light. “We need to form a plan, and in case you hadn’t noticed, we’re not exactly getting anywhere.”

One of the outlaws scoffed and glared at him. “Oh, and you’ve got the perfect solution, huh, Secka? You think you run the place...”

“If I ran the place, idiots like you would have been kicked out a long time ago,” Secka growled, cutting him off with a sharp flick of his tail and a cold, bored look in his eyes. “None of you morons seem keen to take up the throne, so shut up and behave.” He glared around at the outlaws as if daring them to speak.

One of the outlaws let out a growl. “Fine. Would you just get on with it, Secka?”

“Yeah, start talking,” another one snapped with a cold snarl.

Secka rolled his eyes and heaved a long, exasperated sigh. “You all are just so much fun to be around.”

Keeping his eyes locked on the smoky kraguer, Jeb felt a tiny prickle of jealousy. Not a single hint of fear hid behind the nonchalance and annoyance gleaming in Secka’s half-lidded gray eyes. The cold, angry glares of the kraguer’s scorched into Secka’s fur, but the gray kraguer didn’t seem even the slightest bit afraid even in a cavern filled with murderers and other criminals. Just the thought of being in his place and speaking out the way he had sent shivers racing down Jeb’s spine. Why couldn’t he be like that?

Secka flicked his tail. “Anyway, as I was saying, we need to come up with a plan. Since you morons can’t seem to come up with anything, I think one of us should go to Zerone’s Court to see what he’s doing, if for nothing else than to know what *not* to do.”

Furious snarls and protests erupted among the outlaws before the words had even left Secka’s mouth. Rage gleamed in the eyes of the outlaws and they whipped around to mutter and snarl at the ones closest to them. A kraguer let out a loud, booming snarl and lunged toward Secka with claws outstretched. Jeb felt his heart stop in his chest at the sight and let out a squeak of terror, but Secka just rolled his eyes and side-stepped the attack, sending the outlaw flying into the wall. His smoky fur didn’t even bristle in alarm, and his eyes remained narrowed and dull with boredom.

Looking annoyed but otherwise apathetic, he simply shrugged and turned to push his way out of the snarling crowd, shoving past criminals and sitting back against the wall once again.

Arguments rang out among the crowd, and before Jeb could even realize what had happened, fights erupted among the outlaws. Snarls and cries of fury and terror rose in the air as the criminals leapt at each other and tumbled through the cavern, clawing viciously at each other faces and digging their fangs into each other's sides. Jeb's eyes widened in horror and a jolt of fear shot up his spine, but when he glanced over at Secka, he thought he saw the tiniest hint of satisfaction light up his dark eyes.

Standing close to Jeb, Telku cut his eyes to the side to look at Secka. He frowned and narrowed his eyes in confusion and skepticism. "Secka's a fool if he thinks Zerone will help us. He's the reason we're here." He glanced around at Jati and Jeb. "I'm going back to our cave den. Are you two coming with me?"

"Of course we are," Jati snapped, flicking her tail. "Jeb, you want to get away from this crowd, right? I don't think you want to be around these freaks."

Jeb flattened his ears in indignation, feeling a sting of pain when he realized even his mother thought he was a coward. Opening his mouth, he tried to protest, but his retort came out as a shrill squeak when one of the outlaws let out a low growl. Darting forward, he cowered beside his father and looked around shakily. "Let's get out of here!"

Jati let out a soft sigh and rolled her eyes before padding forward to walk alongside Telku. Keeping close to his parents, Jeb started to follow them back to his cave den, then froze with a jolt of fear when a gray and black-striped paw reached out to touch his shoulder and stop him. Suppressing a cry of terror, he whirled around and froze. A rush of relief washed over him when he saw Secka standing in front of him, staring down at him with narrowed gray eyes and holding him still with his paw.

The gray kraguer looked past him and met the questioning eyes of his parents. "Telku, Jati...mind if I borrow Jeb for a minute?"

Telku opened his mouth to protest, then hesitated, and finally gave a tired nod. "Fine. Just don't get into any trouble."

"Bring him back in one piece," Jati muttered, flicking her tail and following Telku back into the cave den.

Secka followed them with his gaze, then gave Jeb a tiny flick of his tail and gestured for him to follow him. "Come on."

Narrowing his eyes with unease, Jeb cautiously followed Secka and struggled to pick his way down the stones lining the curve of the basin in the same smooth way Secka did. Padding easily across the crater that had once held their beautiful spring, Secka leapt up onto the tiny strip of stone on the opposite side of the basin and sat back to wait for Jeb. The moonlight from above shone down on him, turning his gray fur and ashen eyes to silver. Stumbling nervously forward, Jeb sat back in front of him and tried to stop his fur from bristling in terror at being so close to the hole leading into the surface world where the creatures roamed. Looking up to meet Secka's gaze, he shrank back at his dark expression. He couldn't help but feel small and intimidated around him since Secka was fifteen—four years his senior—and because he could see a dark gleam of danger behind the typical nonchalance in his pale eyes.

He shuffled his paws uncomfortably. "What do you want, Secka?"

Secka narrowed his eyes and glanced over at the outlaws for a long moment before looking back to meet Jeb's eyes. "I want to see what Zerone's doing just so we can get some ideas for what to do about the creatures ourselves. I doubt he'll help us—in fact, I *know* he won't help us—but those weird creatures are a problem for everyone in the forest, and he'll talk if we make him. I want to know if Zerone's Court is more protected from the creatures than the Spring, and I want to know what Zerone's planning on doing about this problem. Knowing him, he might be ready to attack those creatures or throw himself at their mercy. The guy is totally unpredictable. I, at least, want to know what we're going to have to deal with. Outlaws or not, whatever Zerone does still affects us, and I want to make sure he doesn't doom us to death."

"I...I think you're right," Jeb stammered, trying not to shiver with fear at his cool words. "But what do *I* have to do with..."

"I'm going to Zerone's Court." Secka narrowed his eyes and flicked his tail nonchalantly. "You're coming with me."

Jeb blinked in surprise, then gaped at him in horror and disbelief. "What?"

Secka raised an eyebrow. "You heard me. Now come on, we're wasting time."



Jeb stared at him in dismay, his blue and green eyes widening in terror. He shook his head desperately back and forth, feeling his fur bristle in alarm and panic. “No way, Secka! I’m not going up there with those creatures around!”

Secka narrowed his eyes in annoyance. “The creatures are probably asleep.”

“Yeah, but...” Jeb glanced down at his paws with wide, terrified eyes, searching desperately for a way out of it. “Even if the creatures are asleep, I can’t show my face in Zerone’s Court! Neither of us can! We’re outlaws!”

Secka smirked and let out a snicker. “What’s he going to do about it? I bet he’s just as terrified as us. I would *enjoy* seeing him and his guards try to attack us.”

Jeb shivered and looked up at him with horrified eyes. “But...but Keruni’s there!”

Secka raised an eyebrow. “You’re scared of Zerone’s prissy, stuck-up daughter?”

Jeb’s eyes lit up with hope and he nodded rapidly. “Yeah, see—I’m a coward! Why would you want to take me?”

“Who else would I take with me?” Secka looked over him with bored, uninterested gray eyes before meeting his gaze once again. “You’re not exactly the ideal kraguer to act as a confidant, but you’re the only one smart enough to see sense in it.”

Jeb shook his head frantically, his fur bristling with terror and his heart thumping with the desperate hope of getting out of it. “No I don’t!” he exclaimed quickly. “I don’t see any sense in it at all. I think it’s the stupidest plan I’ve ever heard!”

Secka raised an eyebrow. “Really?” He took a step closer and leaned down to level his gaze with Jeb’s, his eyes narrowing. A low growl rumbled in the outlaw’s throat as he leaned close to Jeb’s face and curled his lip. “You sure change sides quickly.”

Shivers raced down Jeb’s spine and he leapt away from him with a terrified squeak. Cowering on the edge of the basin, he looked up with wide eyes and trembled. “I...I’m sorry,” he stammered. “You’re not going to hurt me, are you?”

Secka rolled his eyes and let out a long sigh. “No, I’m not going to hurt you, you little wimp.” His narrowed eyes glinted with frustration and he stalked forward to stand in front of Jeb. “The creatures are asleep, Zerone is as much of a wimp as you are, and his army’s too weak to hurt us...Any other excuses you’ve got?”

Jeb shrank down and shivered. “The disasters?”

“We’ve been dealing with the disasters forever, Jeb! Jeez!” Secka rolled his eyes in exasperation. “I think you’re all out of excuses, so come on!” Before he could protest, Secka leaned down and grabbed him by the scruff to drag him away from the basin.

Jeb’s eyes widened in alarm and he let out a squeak of terror, struggling desperately in Secka’s rough grasp and scraping his claws frantically against the cold floor. “Let go!” he cried, thrashing violently in Secka’s grasp.

Secka looked down at him with apathetic gray eyes and shrugged. “When you decide to walk on your own and quit trying to find a way out of it, I’ll let you go.”

“All right, all right!” Jeb let out a terrified whimper and fell still, staring up at Secka with wide eyes. “I’ll come with you. Just stop pulling me!”

Secka scoffed and released his grip on Jeb, letting him slump down against the hard, rocky floor. He watched through narrowed eyes as Jeb painfully pushed himself to his paws and dusted himself off, then raised an eyebrow when he looked up at him with hurtful blue and green eyes. “Look,” the gray outlaw muttered, flicking his tail toward the violent fray of kraguers fighting on the other side of the spring. “I think it will be safer up on the surface world anyway, considering how the freaks down here are acting. Besides, we need to go up to find food. It’s been days since someone went up to bring back food, and I know you’re as hungry as I am.” He looked away from Jeb and narrowed his eyes at the light streaming down through the hole in the ceiling. “It’ll work better if I bring you with me to Zerone’s Court. If you’re with me, he’s less likely to see us as a threat.”

Jeb flattened his ears. “So *that’s* why you’re taking me!”

Secka shrugged. “That, and to use you as a decoy if the creatures attack.”

Jeb's eyes widened in horror and he gaped in shock, but Secka just let out a laugh and grinned at the sight of his stunned expression. "I'm kidding, Jeb! Jeez, lighten up!"

He flattened his ears and stared at him in disbelief. "I'm supposed to lighten up when I'm going out to become creature food?"

Secka snickered. "Yeah, live a little. Stop being such a chicken."

Jeb shivered. "I think I'd rather be a live chicken than a dead hero."

Secka rolled his eyes and let out a laugh without bothering to reply. Turning away from him, he looked up at the hole in the ceiling and bunched his muscles. Before Jeb could find any more ways to protest, Secka lunged forward and dug his claws into the dirt and grass on the other side of the hole. The black tip of his tail disappeared from sight when he smoothly pulled himself up, but a moment later, his face appeared over the entrance to the Spring, outlined by the moonlight. "Come on, Jeb. I don't have all day!"

Jeb narrowed his eyes and glanced back at the stony land on the other side of the basin. A shiver crept up his spine when he heard vicious snarls from the outlaws and caught sight of them clawing at each other and rolling across the floor. Tearing his eyes off of the criminals and taking a deep breath, he faced Secka, bunched his muscles, and leapt forward. He dug his claws into the side of the hole and scrabbled desperately to pull himself up. He just barely managed to suppress a cry when Secka grabbed him and yanked him up onto the surface world above.

A wave of cold fear washed over him when he shakily lifted his head and looked around at the woods. Dark shadows covered the tall grass. The bleak leaves on the tall trees rising up around him rustled in a cool breeze, creating eerie shadows across the ground. Dull bushes puffed up around him, seeming to hide enemies from sight. The woods just beyond the tiny clearing was pitch black in the dim light of the night.

Terrifying images swept through Jeb's mind, making him shiver violently with fear. When he peered out at the darkness beyond the trees, he imagined the huge, strange creatures hiding and waiting to leap out at him. Behind every bush he pictured a creature crouched down, waiting to spring. Trembling in fear, he imagined seeing creatures leap out from behind the trees and lash out at him with enormous claws. He could picture the strange animals baring their huge, bloody fangs. He even felt a tiny tingle of pain

and horror spread through his body when he imagined their fangs sinking into him and tearing him into a million pieces. When he pricked his ears, it almost seemed like he could hear a dangerous growl rumbling from somewhere deep inside the black woods.

A tiny whimper of fear escaped his mouth. At an annoyed, stern glance from Secka that told him to shut it if he wanted to make it back to the Spring alive, Jeb bit his lip. Every inch of him longed to be back in his cave den where it was safe.

The gray outlaw gave him a long warning look before diving into a clump of undergrowth, making the leaves rustle around him. A jolt of fear shot down Jeb's spine when the older kraguer's tail disappeared behind the leaves and the rustling noise interrupted the silence. What if there was some kind of creature in there or a trap waiting behind the leaves? He tried to shake the thoughts out of his head, but a hint of doubt and uncertainty lingered as he forced himself to dart into the bush.

Pushing his way past branches and trying not to make the leaves rustle, Jeb let his eyes dart around, searching for any sign of creatures. A tiny glimmer of relief washed over him when he pushed his way out of the undergrowth without being impaled by claws. Struggling to hide the fear and stop shaking, he staggered after Secka and scanned the woods around him for any sign of glinting claws. Secka's gray eyes narrowed in annoyance when he glanced back at Jeb, but despite his unbothered façade, he cautiously looked over both shoulders with every step. Jeb followed close behind him and tried to suppress a whimper when he saw a hint of fear in Secka's gray eyes. Somehow he couldn't find much comfort in knowing his only protection was just as afraid as he was.

Secka led the way forward and hid the uncertainty in his eyes, pushing his way past bushes and lashing his tail in frustration when Jeb couldn't suppress another whimper of fear. Just when he began to feel faint, Secka led him around a tree and crouched down to creep into a bush. Freezing in place, he flicked his tail to indicate for Jeb to join him. Jeb glanced over both shoulders and shuddered before he cautiously leaned down and crawled after the older outlaw. Pushing a few branches and leaves out of his eyes, he peered out of the bush and felt his eyes widen. A wave of relief washed over him when he spotted a huge, flat brown stone lying across the grass on the edge of a tiny clearing. His tense shoulders sagged

with relief and he let out a shaky sigh. He had never felt so happy to be near the entrance to Zerone's Court in his life.

He looked up at Secka and opened his mouth to say something, but the gray kraguer slapped a paw over his mouth and hissed in annoyance. "Hush!"

Jeb felt a jolt of terror shoot up his spine. Whipping around, he stared out through the leaves, scanning the clearing desperately for any sign of the enemy. Had Secka spotted one of the beasts roaming around the forest? Was he actually going to be ripped to shreds? He looked up and froze in terror, his breath stopping and his heart freezing in his chest. On the opposite side of the clearing, a thick clump of bushes began to rustle.

Every muscle in his body tensed to run. His claws dug deep into the ground in horror and he only managed to suppress a cry of terror because of Secka's paw clamped over his mouth when a paw stepped out from the bushes. Jeb's eyes widened in shock when a familiar face poked out of the undergrowth and his terror slowly faded away into numbness and relief when several of his own kind stepped out from the thick brush.

Secka's eyes lit up. "We're in luck," he whispered.

Jeb shivered and glanced at him in disbelief. "We are?"

"Yeah," Secka muttered, keeping his eyes trained on the kraguer at the front of the group. "That's Zerone himself. He's just got a few of his guards with him."

Jeb flicked his tail uneasily and glanced nervously at Zerone out of the corner of his eye. "So what do we do now? Just stroll out and say hi?"

Secka shrugged. "I don't see why not." Before Jeb could protest, the gray kraguer pushed his way out of the bush in a rustle of leaves. Zerone and his guards jumped and looked up at him in alarm. A tiny hint of relief colored their eyes when they realized it was one of their own kind, but a look of wariness lingered on the Emperor's face.

"Hey, Zerone." Secka casually waved his tail in greeting and padded forward to stand in front of him.

A guard bristled in fury and let out a cold growl. "That's *Emperor* Zerone!"

Secka raised an eyebrow and flicked his tail. "He's not my Emperor."

The large kraguer standing in front of Secka narrowed his eyes warily. Zerone's glossy, perfectly groomed yellow and black striped fur laid flat, but the brown-tufted tip of his short tail twitched uneasily back and forth. One of his eyes was a brilliant green hue as bright as his daughter's and the other was a dark smoky gray, but both of them were narrowed in unease, as if he loathed every minute he had to spend in the upper world.

Glancing back at his guards and then turning to glare down at the outlaw, the Emperor let out a low growl. "Secka. What are you doing here? And who else have you brought with you?" His gray and green eyes narrowed with suspicion and he scanned the clearing around him, as if expecting an ambush to erupt at any minute.

Secka heaved a long sigh. "Relax, Zerone. The only one with me is Jeb."

The guards bristled and one of them let out a low growl of fury. "The arsonist?"

Secka rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that's the one."

Crouching low to stay hidden, Jeb narrowed his eyes and bristled in indignation, but didn't dare speak up or try to fight back against old quarrels.

Zerone narrowed his eyes and gritted his teeth. "Where is he?"

Secka raised an eyebrow and glanced back at the bushes where Jeb was hiding, flicking his tail in indication for him to step out. Watching him closely, Jeb hesitated, then took a deep breath and shakily rose to his paws. His fur bristled with the uncomfortable feeling of being watched when he forced himself to step forward on trembling legs and stand beside Secka. With every second that ticked by out in the open, he felt smaller and smaller and weaker and weaker. How long were they going to stand out in the tiny clearing where anyone could see them? Could they at least go into the Court so the creatures couldn't find them?

The Emperor narrowed his eyes at Jeb and glared at Secka. "What do you want?"

Secka let his eyes flick back and forth around the small clearing and the dark woods surrounding them. "Can we talk about this in the Court?"

"Why's that?" Zerone's fur bristled. "Why should I allow you two in my Court?"

“Because it’s dangerous up here?” Annoyance and scorn tinged Secka’s cold tone and his eyes narrowed in disdain. “Look, Zerone, we just came to talk. We’ll leave as soon as we’re done talking. And we’re not in the mood or the state to attack you, seeing as how our food sources are a bit limited lately, so stop being so paranoid.”

Zerone narrowed his gray and green eyes, but after a long moment of hesitation, he gave a curt nod. “Very well, Secka, Jeben. You may come into the upper half of my Court, but no further. And you *will* leave after you tell me what you’re doing here.”

“You have my word,” Secka replied with a sarcastic growl and a tiny smirk.

Zerone heaved a sigh and turned around to face the flat brown stone. “A lot of good that’s worth,” he muttered under his breath.

His guards eyed the two outlaws with distrustful, suspicious looks as they padded after their Emperor to stand around the brown stone. At an order from Zerone, they started to push the stone to the side, filling the air with a faint rumbling sound.

The fur along Jeb’s back rose up in fear as he crept forward beside Secka to stand in front of the stone. He wasn’t sure whether to feel relieved at leaving the creature-infested upper world or terrified at being in the hostile presence of Zerone and his creepy guards. The moment he stepped up to stand beside Zerone, he looked up and their eyes locked. A jolt of alarm shot down Jeb’s spine when the Emperor’s gray and green eyes bored into his, trying to read him and warn him at the same time. Trying not to tremble, Jeb tore his gaze away from the Emperor and bitterly narrowed his eyes. Did Zerone himself always have to act like he was such a criminal when *he* at least knew the truth?

The guards shoved the stone aside, revealing a rough, gaping hole in the ground that led down into a tiny, empty room made out of dusty brown dirt. Pushing past Zerone, Secka leapt down into the small underground room. Jeb instantly stumbled forward to follow him and half-jumped, half-fell into the tiny hole. Zerone and his guards lunged after him and landed neatly on the dirt-covered ground. The Emperor sat in front of the two outlaws and regarded them with a cold look while his guards tugged the huge brown stone halfway over the hole to hide the underground room from sight.

“You four can go back to the Court,” Zerone muttered, glancing over at the guards. “I think I’ll be fine. These two are useless and probably couldn’t hurt me.”

The guards narrowed their eyes and opened their mouths to protest, but their words died away when they caught sight of the Emperor’s stern, commanding glare. Dipping their heads, they padded past the Emperor and slunk toward a rough, wide tunnel dug into the side of the dirt room that led into the main, festive part of Zerone’s Court. Jeb followed them with his eyes until all of them had disappeared into the dirt tunnel.

Zerone glanced at the spot where they had vanished before turning back toward Jeb and Secka and curling his lip. “So...what brings you two *outlaws* to my Court?”

Jeb flattened his ears in indignation and felt a tinge of pain and sadness burn in his chest, but Secka flicked him sharply with his tail and faced the Emperor with a calm expression. “What do you think brought us here? Listen, Zerone, I think it’s pretty obvious that we have a problem, a problem that affects all of us.”

The Emperor narrowed his eyes and hesitated for a long moment before reluctantly letting out a sigh and staring down at his paws. “All right, we have a problem. I suppose you’re talking about those...creatures that have invaded our home.”

“What else would I be talking about?” Secka snapped. “Of course I mean those creatures. Now let’s cut to the chase—what are you going to do about them?”

Zerone lashed his tail and gritted his teeth. “Why should I tell you two anything?”

Secka heaved a sigh and put a paw to his forehead. “Just spit it out already.”

The Emperor narrowed his eyes and hesitated for a long moment before letting out a low growl. “I haven’t got a plan, all right? What exactly am I supposed to do?”

Secka’s eyes widened and he gaped at him in disbelief. “So you’re just going to sit back and watch us all starve while we’re trapped hiding down in the underground? You’re just going to wait for the creatures to find us and start killing us?” Secka let out a low growl and narrowed his eyes at Zerone. “What kind of Emperor are you?”



Zerone's fur bristled in fury. "What else am I supposed to do? I'm still trying to formulate a plan, so stop prying. I shouldn't even be talking to you outlaws about anything, much less my plans about these creatures!"

Secka rolled his eyes. "Fine, have it your way. But if you want my advice—which I'm giving anyway even though I know you don't—you shouldn't do anything until you know more about these freaks."

Zerone narrowed his eyes. "I had already thought of that, Secka, and I don't need a criminal like you to say it."

"Well, what *have* you found out?" Secka retorted, flicking his tail and facing him with a bored, condescending look in his eyes.

"I've found out a few things," Zerone snapped, bristling defensively. "What about you two? Are those creatures still going to your Spring to get water?"

"No, the outlaws drained the spring so that they wouldn't come anymore." He raised an eyebrow. "Stop taking the focus off yourself and tell us what you found out."

Zerone flattened his ears and hesitated for a long moment before letting out a low sigh. "Fine. I've noticed that the creatures seem to be settling all over the upper part of the forest. So far they haven't discovered any of us. But since they're making dens all over the forest, it seems like they might be staying here...permanently."

Secka blinked in surprise.

Jeb gaped in horror, feeling his heart beat rapidly with dismay. "There's nothing we can do about it? I mean...this is *our* forest! We were here way before those creatures invaded! They can't just come in and take over our forest and force us into hiding!"

"Unfortunately, they can." Zerone cast a cold, warning look in his direction. "There's nothing we can do as of now. Until we find out more about these creatures, our only choice is to hide in the daylight and search for food under the cover of night."

"And what happens when one of them finds us? What then?" Secka shook his head in disgust. "This is ridiculous. We can't hide forever!"

Zerone gritted his teeth and glared at them. "I don't have all the answers! I'm working on it, all right!" He let out a low growl and curled his lip. "I shouldn't even be talking to the pathetic likes of you criminal scum."

Just get out. You got what you came for, now leave and never come back to my Court!”

Secka rolled his eyes. “I heard that the first time you threw me out. But fine, we’ll leave since you obviously can’t even rule your own Empire.” Casting a dark glance at the Emperor, he stalked forward, shoving Zerone to the side with a cold flick of his tail. Not bothering to look back, he leapt upward and crawled back up onto the surface world. Letting his back brush against the brown stone pushed halfway over the hole, the gray outlaw pushed himself up onto the upper world and disappeared out of sight, leaving Jeb and Zerone alone in a tense, uncomfortable silence.

Jeb shuffled his paws nervously and tried to avoid looking at Zerone. “I...I guess I should go,” he stammered, stumbling forward and hastily creeping after Secka.

Zerone glanced up at him with a dark glare and before Jeb could move forward to jump up to the surface world, he stepped in front of him and blocked his way. Jeb looked up at him in surprise, but the Emperor stared down at him with a cautious, wary expression in his dark green and gray eyes. “Why are you hanging around with Secka?”

Jeb blinked in surprise, then narrowed his eyes uneasily. “He’s the only one who’s relatively nice to me and doesn’t try to kill me,” he muttered.

The Emperor curled his lip. “So he’s your friend?”

Jeb shrugged uncomfortably. “Sort of, not really...I don’t know. He just helps me sometimes.” He frowned and sharply flicked his tail. “What do you care anyway? You’re the one that exiled me to the Spring in the first place.”

Zerone narrowed his eyes and didn’t respond. He remained quiet for a long time, watching Jeb with uncertain, almost frightened green and gray eyes. After a long moment of hesitation, he murmured, “Why have you been so cold to Keruni since the fire?”

Jeb narrowed his eyes and flattened his ears. “You mean the fire *you* started?”

Zerone gritted his teeth and stared at Jeb with a cold, dangerous expression for a long moment before he finally gave him a dark nod. “Yes...the fire *I* started.”

Jeb tried to hide a twinge of pain. "I'm not the one who's been cold. She was supposed to be my friend, but she turned on me the instant you told her to. She hates me now. *She's* the one who's been cold to *me*. She fights with me every chance she gets."

"Just leave her alone," Zerone muttered, making Jeb's ears prick up in surprise. For a moment, he thought he could hear a pleading tone in the Emperor's strained voice.

Jeb narrowed his eyes and flicked his tail. "You're asking the wrong animal to leave the other one alone."

Zerone looked down and hesitated for a long moment, his eyes narrowing and his claws sheathing and unsheathing in unease. After what seemed like ages, he finally looked up to meet Jeb's gaze with scared, haunted gray and green eyes. His voice came out as a harsh whisper. "Do you know who that fire killed?"

Jeb frowned in confusion at the sudden change of subject and felt a tingle of worry and wonder creep down his spine when he realized how old and defeated Zerone seemed. Blinking several times, he forced himself to shake off the feeling of shock and unease and narrowed his eyes. "It killed lots of kraguers, Zerone, and because of that, I got to take the hit for you and spend the rest of my life trapped down in the Spring."

The Emperor let out a cold growl, but a tiny hint of relief seemed to flash in his gray and green eyes. "Never mind," he muttered, lashing his tail and suddenly looking more like his normal self. "You're nothing but selfish. Just get out of here."

Jeb winced in pain and narrowed his eyes at the Emperor. After a long moment of hesitation, he took a deep breath and tried to push away his guilt before whirling around and facing the top of the room. Bunching his muscles, he leapt upward and grabbed onto the side of the hole, scrabbling frantically to pull himself up and get far away from Emperor Zerone. A cold feeling of fear shot through him when he stumbled onto the grass and he looked up rapidly to make sure Secka was standing in front of him.

"Did Zerone yell at you?" Secka snickered, looking both bored and amused.

"Sort of," Jeb muttered, trying not to shiver with unease. "Can we just get back?"

Secka shrugged. "Sure. Let's go." Flicking his tail, he lunged into the bushes surrounding the clearing and disappeared into the darkness of the woods, leaving Jeb with no other choice but to follow him into the night.

"Where were you?"

Jeb looked up from where he had landed on the rocky floor of the Spring just in time to see Telku and Jati race toward him with stunned, narrowed eyes. Secka cast a glance over at Jeb's parents as they skidded to a stop in front of them and raised an eyebrow at Jeb, starting to pad away to the back of the Spring. "I'll let you handle this."

"Secka." Telku narrowed his eyes in unease. "Did you endanger my son?"

Secka flicked his gray, black-tipped tail apathetically and turned around to stalk toward his cave den. A moment later, he disappeared into the shadows covering the back of the Spring without a word.

"What happened?" Jati demanded, tearing her gaze off of the place where Secka had vanished and narrowing her eyes at Jeb. "We were so worried about you. We even went up to the surface to look for you."

Jeb took a deep breath and tried to calm the frantic beating of his heart and the fear that lingered after being in the upper world. "Mom, Dad, it's all right. I'm fine. Secka just had this idea and he wanted me to go with him. There was no trouble, I promise."

Telku let out a growl and inspected Jeb carefully. "There better not have been or else Secka is in huge trouble."

"I'm fine," he insisted, trying to smile. "I can take care of myself."

"On the surface? With those creatures?" Jati scoffed and flicked her tail. "You're lucky you weren't killed. I want to know what you and that Secka guy were thinking."

Jeb stared down at his paws, his fur prickling. "It was his idea, not mine," he muttered. "It was nothing..."

"If it involves you, it's something," Telku interrupted.

Jeb blinked in surprise and couldn't help but give a weak smile when he realized how concerned they were and how they hadn't had a single argument so far. The small amount of time they had been together without fighting seemed almost like a record. He wondered if he should disappear more often if it meant they would get along, but after a moment,

he let out a sigh and shook the thoughts out of his head. "All right, fine. Secka thought we should go to speak to Emperor Zerone to figure out what he was doing about the creatures. We traveled to his Court and talked to him a bit. It didn't exactly help, though. He's more clueless than we are. All he told us was that we would have to hide until we figure out more about the creatures... After that, we just left."

"Secka's mad," Jati muttered, lashing her tail while Jeb stared uncomfortably down at his paws. "If he thinks he'll get anything from Zerone..."

"It was a worthwhile idea," Telku said with a long, tired sigh. "But Jeb, you shouldn't have gone with him."

"It's not like I had a choice," he muttered, narrowing his eyes.

Telku sighed. "I'll have a talk with him. Right now, you should get some sleep. It's late and I know you're probably a bit scared and exhausted after something like that."

Jeb narrowed his eyes in indignation, but Jati cut him off before he could protest. "Do what your father says, Jeb. You could use some rest after your ordeal." Letting out a long sigh, she rolled her eyes and muttered under her breath. "As for the creatures, we'll just have to do the same thing as the *great* Emperor and wait to see what happens."

"I suppose you're right," Telku heaved a sigh. "We'll just have to wait. It's all we can do at this point."

Flames leapt up into the sky, climbing their way up tall, towering trees and charring the bright, colorful leaves into ash. The loud, roaring sound of the fire echoed around the forest, burning in Jeb's ears and sending a wave of terror crashing over him. Smoke billowed up into the sky, blocking out the bright light of the sun and hiding the light blue sky behind a cloud of ashy darkness. Flickering red and orange flames blazed across the ground, igniting the stiff pale grass and swallowing up any bushes or plants in its way. The eerie blaze danced all around him, sending waves of heat gliding over him and lighting up the dark, smoky forest with a creepy flickering light.

Screams echoed throughout the woods, and when Jeb peered through the wild blaze, he could see flashes of yellow and black fur racing helplessly through the forest. Trees creaked and cried out as the flames

crept up their trunks. Loud crashes marking the collapse of enormous trees somewhere off in the distance sent shivers racing down his spine. The scent of burning wood made him crinkle his nose in disgust and he struggled to breathe through the thick, smoky air.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to block out the image of the flickering flame, but the cries, the slams, and the earsplitting roar of the fire still rang in his ears. His eyes opened wide, shining with terror and alarm. He looked around wildly at the bright, glowing flames all around him, then froze in shock. Two wide, panicked eyes glowed through the flames. Both eyes flashed with a bright, brilliant green hue in the eerie light without even a tiny hint of gray.

Jeb's eyes flew open and he jerked upward with a shaky cry. His heart raced frantically and heavy pants shuddered out of his chest as he struggled to breathe. Every inch of his body shook with terror and his fur was drenched in cold sweat. He looked wildly around the pitch black cave, gasping for air and taking in the stony walls of the den and the freezing cold floor. Images from his nightmare flashed before his eyes before he forced himself to shake them off, struggling to calm the wild beat of his heart.

When his heartbeat had finally slowed back to normal and he could breathe again, he let out a long, shaky sigh and sat back against the frigid, rocky floor, trembling in fear. "I-it was just a d-dream," he stammered, trying to make himself believe it.

His eyes darted around the cave den and landed on his parents. He tried to relax when he saw them sleeping peacefully on the stony floor. Jati had curled her tail up around her nose and flattened her ears against the side of her face, while Telku had laid his head comfortably on his paw. Neither of them stirred in their sleep.

Turning away from them, Jeb took a deep breath and turned to face the entrance of the den, struggling to calm himself down. A shiver of dread and fear raced down his spine when memories of the nightmare whisked through his mind. Dreams about the horrible fire that had ravaged the forest and incriminated him had haunted him ever since he had been exiled to the Spring. Every few nights, his sleep had been disturbed with memories of the fire destroying the forest and images of Zerone's gray and green eyes gleaming through the flames he had created. His latest nightmare had been

different, though. Instead of seeing Zerone's unique eyes gleaming through the fire, he had seen only two pure green eyes. Not one green and one gray.

A shiver of dread crept up his spine at the memory of the eyes even though he didn't have any idea what it meant. He frowned in confusion and unease when he remembered the green eyes that definitely hadn't been Zerone's. If it hadn't been Zerone hiding behind the flames in his dream, who was it? His unease grew stronger when he thought about it and wondered whose eyes he had seen gleaming through the blaze.

Cold fear spread through his body when he suddenly remembered how Zerone had held him back when he had tried to leave and follow Secka. The scared, haunted look in the Emperor's eyes burned in his mind. Why had Zerone asked him if he knew who the fire had killed when it had happened a year ago and they hadn't even been talking about it?

Jeb narrowed his eyes in confusion and tried to ignore the alarm turning his blood to ice. He knew everything that had happened in the fire. Zerone had started the fire and framed him and his father when it had gotten out of hand. The memories of the vicious flames and the image of how he and Telku had leapt past the flames to save Zerone's life remained vivid in his mind...but was that really all that had happened? Could there be more to it than he knew? How could he find out if there really *was* more?

He shivered with unease, suddenly wondering what else might have happened in the fire. When he had been sent to live in the Spring, he thought he knew all the details, but when he thought about it, there was always one detail that had been missing. No matter how distinctly he remembered the fire, he had never known *why* Zerone had started it only to frame him when it was over.

*"Do you know who that fire killed?"* Zerone's words echoed in his mind and a shiver of fear slithered down Jeb's spine. He knew the fire had wreaked havoc on the forest, but he didn't know one specific kraguer that had been killed. The haunted tone of the Emperor's voice had made it seem like he had only meant one specific animal.

Questions and worry burned in Jeb's mind and his heart beat faster with sudden wonder and anxiousness. Somehow he knew deep down that he had to find out just who the fire had killed and why it had been started in the first place, but he had no idea where he could possibly find information like that. He looked down at his paws and heaved a sigh, then paused when

another thought flickered into his mind. Glancing toward the entrance, he looked up and narrowed his eyes in wonder, feeling a tiny tingle of hope and curiosity. Secka always seemed to know things. Maybe he could help him.



# Chapter Four

## Disaster

The forest was silent. Pitch black leaves jutting out from sinister branches blocked out the moon, painting the edges of the leaves with eerie silver light. The air seemed tense with chilliness, but not a single breeze rustled through the forest. Not a single shadowed leaf or sprig of dark green grass moved in the empty-looking woods. Through a dark, colorless patch of blooming bushes, Saderia could just barely see a large clearing. The darkness of the night cast a black haze over the silent neighborhood, making it almost impossible to see the hard, rocky edges of the dens scattered above the overgrown grass.

A tiny gleam of moonlight shone through the thick, gray canopy above, illuminating the clearing for barely a second. Dark clouds moved in above the trees, blocking out the moonlight. The leaves slowly began to quiver. The branches began to shake ever so slightly in the pitch black sky. A soft rumbling suddenly filled the tense air.

Saderia whipped around to stare in the direction of the sound, her heart beating faster with fear. The roaring sound grew louder and louder until it filled the air and burned in her ears. The trees in front of her seemed to explode into a shower of splinters as a dark blue wave burst out from behind the trees and thundered down on the woods. Faster than she could have imagined, the deep blue current crashed through the forest, thrashing at bushes and twigs and completely uprooting the trees. The tough bark of the leafy trees splintered before her eyes and the trees collapsed into the furious current with a loud, sickening groan. Booming crashes echoed through the woods when the current whipped the fallen logs against other trees, forcing them down. The woods seemed to bend before the vicious current as it carved a wide path of destruction.

A cry of horror tore out of Saderia's chest. Before she could do anything, the rough wave of dark blue water surged forward and burst into the silent clearing. The trees around the edges groaned and smashed against

the ground, covering the earth with twisted branches and wet leaves before they were swallowed up by the water. Screams echoed around the clearing and sounds like thunderclaps boomed from within it as the water crashed up against the rocky dens. Stones flew in all directions when the dens burst under the attack and shattered like glass. The moon suddenly gleamed from behind the clouds through the holes left by the collapsed trees. Hundreds of spotted animals disappeared under the dark blue current with a raw scream of terror.

Saderia's heart pounded with horror, but it was as if her paws were frozen in place. Her eyes stretched wide with terror as the clearing collapsed. A scream echoed through the woods before the moon disappeared and the scene was plunged into darkness.

"Saderia?"

She blinked her eyes open in surprise. Her heart skipped when she saw amber eyes staring down into hers. Terror pounded in her heart even when she began to notice the familiar dark brown fur and darker brown mane around the lion's glowing amber irises.

"Saderia?" Dash asked again. "Are you okay? You were screaming —"

Saderia stared up at him with wide eyes, unable to understand. The violent images of the dark current crashing through the woods flickered through her mind and her heart stopped. Before Dash could stop her, she sat bolt-upright and stared around in horror.

The rocky edges of the bed dug into her paws as she leapt to her feet and looked around, seeming to see right through Dash. There were no violent waves crashing through the rocky walls of her room and the stone floor was dry. When she glanced wildly to the right, she could see nothing disturbed in the main part of her den. No trees had crashed through the roof or smashed the rocky couch. But something was terribly wrong.

"Saderia, what's wrong?" Dash stared at her in alarm. "Say something!"

Her mind whirled with confusion. "It's the leopards," she gasped. "That river..."

Dash blinked in misunderstanding and started to question her, but he was interrupted by a sharp, scrabbling noise. The rough sound of claws

scraping across stone echoed through the den. Without waiting for Dash to speak, Saderia whipped around and leapt out of her bed. From the other side of the den, she caught a glimpse of Karenisha, Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash creeping toward the entrances of their rooms.

Saderia whirled around to face the entrance of the den and froze in shock as a spotted, tawny figure raced toward them. Loki skidded to a halt in the center of the den, looking wildly around with wide, terrified eyes. Water seeped from her damp fur. Her wild eyes caught Saderia's and desperation flashed in their green depths.

"You have to help!" she pleaded. "The river has flooded and all the leopards are in danger!"

Darkness hung over the woods. The towering trees blocked out any hint of light. Saderia's heart beat faster, but she ignored the fear building inside of her. Her eyes locked on the dense woods ahead and she struggled desperately to dodge the tall grasses and tangling vines pulling her back. Sharp-edged tree branches smacked across her face and yanked viciously at her fur as she leapt forward, but she ignored the stinging pain.

"Hurry, we're almost there!" Loki's desperate cry sounded from up ahead. Saderia looked up and her eyes locked on the tawny figure speeding away from her. Racing faster, she drew close enough to see the fear in Loki's eyes and the frustration of having to run at a pace that felt slow when her friends were in danger. Even at a slower pace than normal, heavy pants were shuddering out of her chest. Loki never panted.

Gritting her teeth, Saderia ran as fast as she could, weaving in and out of the trees. She could hear Dash and her parents crashing through the woods as fast as they could. Their paws slammed against the ground so fast it matched the frantic beat of her heart.

A sharp scream burst from behind the dense wall of growth in front of them, making her blood run cold. More cries reached her ears, echoing around her. The closer she got, the more she was aware of a loud, roaring sound that filled the thick air around them. Her Dream flashed to the front of her mind and her fur bristled in terror at the violent images she had seen. Why hadn't the Dream come sooner? Animals were dying!

Loki shuddered. "It came out of nowhere and hit us like a wave!" she choked out. "We never saw it coming! The last time we checked the

river, the water was calm!”

Saderia opened her mouth to say something, then cut off when a sharp, piercing scream erupted from up ahead. Her eyes widened with shock and Loki’s face seemed to grow paler. “That’s Marlina, Maeta’s sister!” she shouted. “We have to hurry! Come on!”

She darted forward without another word and Saderia raced desperately after her, keeping her eyes on the yellowish blur of her fur. The booming rumbling sound grew louder and louder the closer she got. A few seconds later, the dirt and grass under her paws began to feel damp and when she looked down, she could see tiny streams of water seeping toward her. The roaring sound of the flood filled her ears until she could barely hear the terrified screams of the leopards up ahead. Sharp smacks and crashes burst through the air. The entire forest was almost black in the dim light. With a suppressed cry of fear, she lunged past a clump of dark bushes then froze. Her mouth gaped open in shock as she skidded to a halt on the very edge of the clearing.

The enraged rumbling of the flood roared against her ears as water surged into the clearing. On the right edge of the clearing, the trees were shaking from the impact of the pounding water. The dark current crashed straight through the clearing and smacked into the trees on the edge of the neighborhood. As she watched, one of the tallest trees twisted grotesquely under the pounding of the waves and toppled into the crashing water. She blinked and the tree had already been swept away along the violent path of the water.

Whipping around, she stared at the clearing in horror. Water pumped from the left side of the clearing, sending surges of waves pouring into the neighborhood. The screams from the leopards roared in her ears and when she looked, she could see spotted animals struggling frantically to fight the current carrying them away. Crashes boomed in the air as the flood smacked against the rocky dens, destroying them in seconds and sweeping away the remains. Trees on the opposite edge toppled and crashed against the dens, slicing them open like a gaping wound before the water carried them away.

Loki stood on the edge of the clearing, staring out in horror. Saderia could barely breathe. The scenes from her Dream and the reality in front of her seemed to disappear. For a second, all she could feel was rain pounding

against her back and floodwater dragging her down into dark, gritty depths. A memory of Dingo's soaked face staring at her and snapping at her to keep moving flashed through her mind. A thundering crash signaled the destruction of another den, but all she could see was a sand dune bursting under the pressure of the water. All she could feel was Dingo pulling her to safety.

A scream rose in the air, dragging Saderia out of her thoughts. Blinking rapidly, she looked around, letting Dingo's stern face fade away. Helplessness burned in her chest as she watched the current drag the others away. As she watched, the current slowed and the roar grew softer. Whirling around, she stared at the left edge of the clearing where the water had poured in and felt her heart leap when she realized there wasn't another wave or current crashing toward them. She looked back and saw her family racing up behind her. Turning back around, she faced Loki. "Where's Maeta?"

Loki turned to her in horror. "I...I don't know. She went to help Marlina, but..."

Saderia shook her head. "There's no time. Stay here and help the leopards."

Before Loki could protest, Saderia gritted her teeth and leapt toward the flood, not bothering to think about what she was doing and ignoring the cheetah's cry of shock. Freezing water turned her whole body to ice the second her paws met the waves. She clamped her mouth shut to keep from crying out as she sunk underneath the thrashing water. The sharp current smacked against her, nearly knocking the breath out of her. It swept her backward and tugged her under, but she forced herself to hold her breath and fight against it. Memories from the desert flood nagged at the back of her mind.

Remembering how she had fought that flood, she forced herself upward and let out a gasp when her head broke the surface. Water surged toward her and she instantly closed her mouth. Kicking out furiously, she ignored the water crashing over her head and swam deeper into the devastated clearing. A screaming leopard swept toward her, but before he could be swept away, she sunk her teeth into his scruff, catching him just in time. Behind them, a tree groaned and toppled forward just inches away from them.

The leopard stared at her in shock, but she ignored his grateful green gaze and instantly turned around. Holding her breath, she kicked her paws evenly. She was numbly aware of her parents and Dash lunging into the floodwater and swimming frantically toward the drowning leopards as she moved forward. Loki's stunned face came into view when she got closer. Her muscles screamed in protest, but she didn't dare give up. With a determined growl, she surged forward and dragged the leopard onto dry ground.

"Get him out of here," she snapped to Loki. Loki opened her mouth to speak, but Saderia turned and dove back into the torrent of water before she could chicken out.

The flood smacked against her at full force, but she forced herself to keep moving. Kicking upward, she pushed herself up to the surface and looked around wildly, searching for anyone in need of help. Struggling to keep above the water, she could just barely see through a stream of water the strong figures of Karenisha and Makero pulling several leopards out of the torrent and Dash helping two others on the opposite side. A desperate cry suddenly reached her ears over the roar of the water. Looking up, she caught sight of a splintered tree caught on the side of one of the dens that was still standing. The trunk had bent in half and completely covered the entrance of the den. Through the myriad of soaked branches and leaves, she could see the terrified eyes of animals trapped inside.

Gritting her teeth, she pushed herself through the current, struggling to reach the den. With a burst of strength, she kicked furiously through the water, ignoring the burning pain in her muscles. Her head ducked under the swirl of dirty water, but she pulled herself up and paddled furiously. The water tugged her back, but as she got closer to the den, she managed to snag a claw in the rocky wall of the den before the current dragged her away.

The terrified eyes of the animals inside turned to her in desperation. Taking a deep breath, she ducked under a surge of muddy water and dug her claws into the rocky house. Holding her breath, she pulled her way around the side of the house until she reached the place where the tree had gotten stuck. Coming up for air, she realized the tree's branches had gotten stuck on the side of the house. Keeping one paw on the house to support her, she frantically began pushing and shoving at the tree until finally it was

unstuck. The trunk smacked against the house once before it was dragged away by the floodwater.

The animals struggled out of the house with grateful glances in her direction. Without pausing, they instantly began swimming through the current to the dry edge of the clearing. Saderia watched them for a moment to make sure they could handle it on their own before swimming away to return to Loki on the edge of the neighborhood. She whirled around to push herself back through the water then froze.

The roar of the flood intensified until her ears burned with pain. Whirling around, she stared in horror as a new wave of floodwater surged toward the trees quivering on the edge of the clearing. The trees groaned and crumpled beneath the powerful current, crashing into the water. She struggled to move out of the current, but it surged toward her even stronger than before. She fought desperately to escape, but before she could move, the water came crashing into the clearing, carrying the fallen trees straight toward her.

A scream tore out of her throat. She tried to move away, but the logs tumbled toward her too fast. The toppled tree trunks smacked against her, scraping across her fur and skin and pinning her against the rocky den in a swirl of muddy water, broken branches, and soaked leaves. Pain burned through her body as the rocky walls dug into her back and the trees branches cut into her skin. It seemed as though a thousand needles were digging into her skin as hundreds of twisted branches trapped her against the wall.

She struggled not to cry out, but the water smashed against her and the tree, pushing the branches against her. With a muted scream, she slipped underwater when another current crashed forward, pushing her under. Jerking violently, she struggled to break free, but all she could see were branches and mud. She snapped at the twigs as hard as she could, but couldn't fight her way through. Panic made her heart beat faster and memories from the desert flood flashed through her mind so fast she could barely make out a single one. Her eyes began to slip shut. Dingo wasn't there to save her this time...

Her eyes flew open when one of the branches scraped against her side. Clamping her mouth shut, she just barely suppressed a cry of pain. She struggled away from the stabbing branches then froze when she realized the

tree was moving away from her. With a snap, the tree shuddered away and instantly flew past her, following the current. She stared in surprise and just barely managed to hold in a cry when teeth dug into her scruff.

Looking up, she caught a flash of dark brown fur as she was dragged out of the depths of the muddy current. Her lungs started to ache, but just when she felt she was going to explode, her head bobbed above the surface. She let out a long gasp, ignoring the water trickling over her face, and took in a deep breath of air. A dark brown paw clamped over her mouth just before a wave crashed over her head, then dragged her back up again.

Coughing frantically, she awkwardly turned to see Dash dragging her through the current, his eyes wide with fear. Relief made every inch of her feel weak as he carried her away. With a strong kick, he finally managed to pull her toward the edge of the clearing and lay her on the dry ground. As soon as they were out of the flood, he collapsed beside her, panting and coughing up mouthfuls of dirty water.

Saderia took a deep, shuddering breath and stared numbly out at the clearing as the flood surged on, demolishing the house she had been trapped against and dragging away its cracked remains. She swallowed hard and struggled to stand. She looked at Dash and opened her mouth to speak, then cut off at the sound of a loud roar.

“Loki!”

Whirling around, Saderia blinked in shock when she saw Loki standing just a few feet away. Her eyes grew wide when a powerful leopard bounded out of the woods, her brown eyes gleaming with worry. Loki gaped at the leopard. “Maeta! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” the leopard leader snapped. “I have to leave. I need you to take care of the leopards while I’m gone.”

Loki blinked. “What? Leave? But you can’t leave now! The flood —”

“I have to,” Maeta snarled. “It’s Marlina. Her cub is coming.”

Loki’s eyes grew wide. “What? Now?!”

“Yes, now. Help the others. You’re in charge while I’m gone.” The leopard leader gave Loki a dark, stern look before turning and racing away through the trees, not giving the cheetah a moment to protest. Loki stared after her in horror.

Saderia gaped at them. Marlina was having her cub...now?



“Saderia! Dash!”

She blinked and whirled around. Relief swept over her when she saw Karenisha and Makero leap out from behind the trees and stop just in front of her and Dash.

“Everybody’s safe!” Karenisha called. “Follow us! We have to get out of here!”

Saderia cast a glance back at the vicious flood and shivered. “Come on, Loki!”

Loki whipped around in a daze, then numbly nodded and started toward her. Taking a deep breath, Saderia darted after her parents into the woods. Her muscles ached and her drenched fur clung to her sides, but she ignored it as she crashed through the trees. On either side of her, she could hear Dash and Loki running. She could see flashes of the worried gleam in Dash’s amber eyes and the stunned look in Loki’s green irises.

Dodging around a clump of bushes, the five of them finally skidded to a halt in a patch of woods far away from the Home of the Leopards’ clearing. Spread out in front of them were hordes of soaked leopards huddling together and coughing up dirt and water. Soft moans and cries whispered through the group of leopards. The instant she, Loki, and her family stepped out, the leopards looked up with equal amounts of hope and fear. Karenisha and Makero stepped forward to stand in front of them with Saderia and Dash close beside them. Loki stood frozen to the spot, her eyes wide and dazed.

Karenisha opened her mouth to speak, but before she could say a word, Dash’s eyes gleamed in sudden worry. “Karenisha!” he hissed. “The water! Isn’t it poisonous?”

The Queen paused then froze in horror. She whipped around to stare at Makero, exchanging silent looks of fear and uncertainty.

Dash turned to her frantically. “Did you swallow any of the water?”

Fear spread throughout her drenched body. “N-not much,” she stammered.

He looked up at the King and Queen. “What about you two?”

“We’re fine,” Karenisha murmured. “But the others—”

“Q-Queen Karenisha? King Makero?”

The four members of the royal family whirled around at the sight of the soft, hesitant voice. A small leopard shrank back and studied the ground

nervously the instant their eyes turned to her. Saderia blinked in shock when she recognized the grayish blue eyes of Lisa. Several strange, small plants laid between her paws.

“Yes, what is it?” Karenisha asked gently.

Lisa swallowed nervously and looked down. “Um, I just thought this might...help.” She gestured shakily to the plant. “If the water is poisonous, these herbs might help. It makes animals just sick enough to throw it up. Maeta taught me about it.”

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Makero asked, studying her intently.

“Y-yes,” she stammered. “Maeta’s teaching me to be a healer like she is.” Taking a nervous breath, she forced herself to look up and meet their eyes. “I’m positive.”

“Then thank you, Lisa,” Karenisha said, studying the plants. A light of recognition dawned in her eyes. “Do me a favor and hand these out to those that need them.”

Lisa nodded and rapidly turned around to duck back into the crowd of leopards, shaking nervously and carrying the herbs.

“You can all relax,” Karenisha announced, turning around to face the crowd. “You’re all safe here away from the flood.”

The leopards exchanged nervous glances.

“Where’s Maeta?” one of them shouted.

Another terrified voice rang out. “Is she *dead*?”

Karenisha and Makero exchanged anxious glances that told Saderia they hadn’t seen Maeta at all. She glanced over at Loki and saw her take a deep breath.

“Maeta is not dead,” Loki growled, stepping forward to stand in front of them.

The animals shifted uncomfortably and curious, frightened whispers spread throughout the small crowd of spotted animals.

“Where’s Marlina?” another animal called.

Loki shivered and looked down. Quiet questions spread among the frightened leopards until the cheetah finally took a deep breath and forced herself to look up. She narrowed her eyes and the dazed look disappeared in a gleam of determination. “Marlina is having her cub,” she announced. “Maeta has gone to get her to safety and help her. She will return as soon as she can, but right now she has to help her sister.”

The leopards stared at her in shock and disbelief. Silence hung over the quiet woods, broken only by the distant roaring of the flood.

“Wh-What’s going to happen to us?” one of the leopards finally whispered. “Our home, it’s...destroyed. Who’s going to lead us while Maeta is gone?”

All eyes turned to the King and Queen. Saderia paused, then turned to Loki, letting their eyes meet. Loki stared at her for a long moment before taking a deep breath and turning to face the leopards. “I am,” she announced. “In the flood, Maeta asked me to look after you while she was gone, so listen up. Maeta’s going to be gone with Marlina for a while. She *will* be back as soon as she can, but you all know how important family is to Maeta. In the meantime, we cannot go back to our home until the flooding has stopped. We’ll decide what to do about our homes later on, but now we need a safe place to rest.” She glanced up at the King and Queen. “Do you know what the closest neighborhood is?”

Karenisha nodded thoughtfully. “The bobcat’s neighborhood. It’s just left of here, I believe. We could go to them and ask them if you can stay with them until you figure out what to do with the Home of the Leopards. I’m sure they’ll be willing to help.”

Loki’s eyes flashed with gratitude and she nodded before turning back to the leopards. “You heard them. There’s a safe place waiting for us in just the next neighborhood. After we rest and recover, we’ll figure out what to do with the Home of the Leopards.” She lifted her tail, seeming less shaky. “Everyone follow me.”

The leopards carefully pulled themselves to their paws, looking slightly more assured. Saderia glanced over at Loki and felt a hint of relief when she saw the gleam of determination in her green gaze. She looked over at Dash and managed a tight, grateful smile. With a long sigh, she followed Loki and the others to the bobcat neighborhood, but she couldn’t ignore the thoughts nagging at the back of her mind. Memories of the desert flood and the scenes from her Dream flickered before her eyes, but an even sharper sense of fear and danger seeped into her body. The threatening feeling wouldn’t go away no matter how hard she tried to shake it off.

Glancing out at the crowd of leopards, she couldn’t help thinking the thoughts that were hidden behind the hope in their gleaming eyes: What now?

# Chapter Five

## Disquiet

“I swear we’re becoming nocturnal because of these strange creatures,” Jati muttered under her breath. Lashing her tail, she stepped away from the hole leading down into the underground Spring to stand next to Telku and Jeb and glanced rapidly around at the woods with narrowed eyes. A hint of fear colored her blue and gray irises.

Telku shrugged and glanced at the forest with a guarded expression. “Being nocturnal isn’t that bad. I’m sure one of our ancestors did it, so we shouldn’t complain.”

Jati curled her lip. “Do you always have to be so...” She broke off in a hiss.

Jeb flattened his ears and leaned closer to his parents, scanning the dark, shadowy forest around him with cautious blue and green eyes. Normally he would try to break up the argument, but he barely noticed their bickering as he gazed around at the woods. His eyes tried to pierce through the darkness covering the forest, but the shadows surrounding him were too dark to see through. Only a faint hint of moonlight shone down past the dark clouds, giving just enough light to cast eerie shadows across the stiff grass and light up the rough, creepy looking bark of the towering trees.

Trying to shake off his fear, he took a deep breath and cautiously padded toward a clump of undergrowth on the edge of the clearing. His parents fell silent and padded close behind him as he led the way to a small, narrow clearing just a few paces away from the entrance to the Spring. Shadowed trees holding huge pieces of fruit rose up in front of him when he broke out of the dense woods. Several of the outlaws from the Spring sat in front of him, staring up at the trees and guarding a pile of food. Other outlaws had leapt up into the tree. The leaves of the fruit trees rustled as they searched for food and kept it to themselves or threw it down to another.

Darting forward, Telku leapt up into one of the closest fruit trees. Jeb and Jati sat away from the other outlaws in front of the tree to catch the

fruit he tossed down to them and protect it from the others. Gradually Telku moved through the tree and threw down a few pieces of food. Jati snatched them up as quickly as she could and stood over them, eyeing the outlaws to her left with distrust glimmering in her narrowed eyes.

Jeb tried to keep an eye on the fruit, but his gaze kept wandering to the woods around him. A shudder raced through him when he imagined the creatures that might be hiding in the shadows, but he struggled to push the thoughts away. Tearing his gaze off of the woods, he glanced to the side to look at the outlaws scattered throughout the tiny clearing. Fear gleamed in their eyes even though they tried to hide it and they glanced nervously over both shoulders while they guarded their food. Jeb pricked his ears at the sound of their quiet voices to listen to the conversations swirling around the clearing.

“Hey.” One of the outlaws in front of the trees glanced at a pale kraguer. “Do you think Zerone’s going to go talk to the water to figure out what to do about the creatures?”

“You mean the Sight Pond?” The pale kraguer looked over at him and frowned. “Hmm...maybe. He puts so much faith in that water, so probably.” He opened his mouth to say more, then froze and whipped around just in time to see another outlaw sneaking up toward his pile of food. Narrowing his eyes, he swept his food away and hissed in the face of the kraguer, making them all jump in alarm. “Get away from my fruit, Citcha!”

Citcha jumped away and narrowed her eyes. “I’m a thief, okay? It’s what I do!”

“Well, go thief somewhere else and leave my stuff alone! Jeez!” The outlaw shook his head and let out a long sigh of exasperation.

Citcha rolled her eyes and sat back. “What are you guys talking about anyway?”

“The Sight Pond,” the green-eyed kraguer murmured, narrowing his eyes in wonder. “Zerone’s probably going to go there soon.”

One of the outlaws close by looked up in excitement. “We should attack him!”

“All you ever think about is fighting.” Jeb looked up at the cool sound of Secka’s voice to see the gray kraguer leap down from one of the trees and land smoothly in front of them, dropping his pile of food at his

paws. He glanced at the kraguer that had spoken and raised an eyebrow. “How exactly would attacking him help our situation?”

The other kraguer shrugged. “I don’t know, but it would make me feel better.”

A few murmurs of agreement rose up from the kraguers around them. Secka just rolled his eyes and shook his head. Another kraguer glanced over at them with wide, wondering brown eyes. “I wonder if he’s checked that water yet,” he murmured.

One of the criminals standing nearby let out a snicker and flicked his red-tipped tail. “What? You don’t still believe he reads signs in it, do you?”

The kraguer glared at him. “Well, why not? They always seemed to help before!”

The other one laughed. “If there *are* signs, how come we’ve never seen any?”

Another kraguer looked up with wide eyes. “Only the Emperor can see signs.”

The outlaw with the red tail snorted. “You still believe those lies?”

“Hey, that water’s special!” A brownish outlaw standing around them lashed his tail sharply and narrowed his eyes. “Why else would it not flood?”

Jeb caught sight of Secka muttering under his breath while another kraguer jumped into the conversation. Grabbing his food, the gray outlaw pushed past them and stalked back in the direction of the Spring, shaking his head in annoyance. His eyes slowly scanned the clearing and locked on Jeb as he passed by him to return to the Spring.

He rolled his eyes when he caught him staring at him. “Have fun, Jeb. I’ve got better things to do than sit around listening to these idiots argue about magical water.”

A few of the criminals looked up sharply and glared at him, but Secka hardly seemed to notice. Flicking his black-tipped tail at Jeb, he stalked forward and pushed through the undergrowth on the edge of the clearing before disappearing into the shadows. Jeb stared at the spot where he had vanished, then jumped and nearly let out a cry of surprise at the sound of a loud thump beside him. Whirling around, he froze and felt himself start to relax when he realized Telku had leapt down from the tree.

Jeb's father glanced down at the fruit Jati was guarding and managed a weak smile. After looking around at the other outlaws and pricking his ears at the sound of their argument, he turned to Jeb and frowned. "What were the others talking about?"

Jeb shrugged. "They were just talking about the Sight Pond that Zerone usually goes to in a crisis. Some think it's special and that he *can* read signs in it, some don't."

Telku frowned and glanced down at his paws. "The Sight Pond, huh?" He hesitated for a long moment then let out a long, weary sigh and glanced around at the shadowy woods. "Hmm...I don't know if I still believe that pond gives Emperor Zerone signs to help him deal with a crisis, but we could really use a miracle right now."

Jeb bit his lip and felt a shiver race down his spine. Glancing around at the bickering outlaws and searching nervously for any sign of the creatures, he couldn't help but agree. Between his uncomfortable situation with Zerone and Keruni and the invasion of the creatures, a miracle might be the only thing that could help him now.

Shadows covered the nearly empty underground cavern. Jeb stood nervously in the entrance to his cave den, pressing close against the jagged entrance and staring uneasily out at the huge cave. His eyelids drooped with tiredness and he could hear the sounds of his parents snoring in the den behind him, but his rapidly beating heart kept him wide awake. Memories of the nightmare he had had just a while ago flashed through his mind, making him wince with fear. Images of the flames creeping up the trees and the bright green eyes shining through the blaze whisked through his mind. His heart burned with longing for answers to his questions, but he couldn't help but feel guilty. What right did he have to ask questions about the fire in the middle of another crisis?

Trembling in the cold night air, he stared out at the other side of the Spring. Secka sat several feet away from him near the edge of the basin, surrounded by several other scarred, evil-looking criminals. The moonlight illuminated the smirks on the faces of the criminals and lit up the bored look in Secka's gray eyes. Jeb could see them muttering to each other, but since he was so far away, he couldn't catch what they were saying.

Hours had passed by since he and his family had gathered food. His parents and most of the outlaws had already fallen asleep, but Secka had stayed up to hang around with his creepy cronies. Jeb had stayed up in the hopes that the other outlaws would leave so he could talk to Secka alone, but so far they hadn't moved. He longed to ask Secka about the fire, but his fur bristled with terror. He couldn't name any of the criminals in front of him or remember exactly who had committed what crime, but he was pretty sure there were a few murderers in the group. Why Secka hung out with the more unsavory outlaws, Jeb didn't know, but he had caught him speaking to them a few times before.

Flicking his tail nervously, he glanced at his sleeping parents, then turned back to Secka and his evil friends. After a long hesitation, he took a deep breath and forced himself to step forward, knowing that if he put it off, he would never get the courage again. Trying not to tremble, he stumbled over to the group of outlaws. "S-Secka?"

The gray kraguer looked up at him in disinterest. "Jeb? What do you want?"

One of the bigger outlaws beside him looked over at Jeb and smirked. "Yeah, what does the little coward want?" he snickered, taking a threatening step toward him.

Jeb's eyes widened in terror and he scrabbled backward, flattening himself against the ground. His heart skipped a beat at the bloodthirsty gleam in the criminal's eyes.

The other kraguers let out dark laughs and leered at him. "Hey, just in time, Jeben!" one of them chuckled. "We needed some entertainment."

A few of them stepped toward him, sending a jolt of horror racing up Jeb's spine. Leaping to his paws, he lunged back toward his cave den, letting out a cry of terror. "Mom! Dad! Help!" He bolted across the rocky ground, then let out a sharp shriek when something snagged his tail and sent him crashing to the ground. Pain shot up his spine when he smacked against the rocky ground. Whirling around, he opened his mouth to scream, then paused when he saw Secka standing over them with narrowed eyes.

One of the criminals let out a laugh. "All right, Secka, you caught us a mouse!"

Secka rolled his eyes without looking back. "Guys, get a life." Holding onto Jeb's tail, he dragged him away to the other side of the



cavern. Tears of pain pricked his eyes at being pulled over the craggy ground and he let out a whimper, but didn't dare try to protest. Maybe if he stayed still, they would forget he was there and he could sneak away.

Secka pulled him toward the side of the cavern away from the criminals and finally let go of his tail. He heaved a sigh and helped Jeb to his paws with an annoyed scowl. "What is it now, Jeb? I've got better things to do than bail you out all the time."

"S-sorry," Jeb stammered. "I...I just wanted to talk to you about something."

Secka narrowed his eyes. "Like what?"

"Um..." Jeb peered past him at the criminals lingering and laughing on the edge of the basin and felt a shiver run down his spine. "Can those thugs still hear us?"

He shrugged. "More than likely. Does it matter? There's no privacy here anyway."

Jeb watched the outlaws a moment longer and shivered in unease. Taking a deep breath, he faced Secka and lowered his voice. "I...I want to talk about the fire."

Secka raised his eyebrows. "You want to talk about the fire you started?"

Jeb narrowed his eyes. "I didn't start it and you and everyone else know it!"

The gray outlaw rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Why do you want to talk about that?"

"I just..." Jeb shifted uncomfortably. "I just need to know some things."

Secka let out a long sigh. "You know, I really don't have time for this."

Jeb's eyes widened in desperation. "Please!" he begged. "It's really important."

He rolled his eyes. "Fine. What is it you want to know?"

Jeb hesitated for a long moment and stared nervously down at his paws, feeling almost afraid of asking the questions that had been swirling through his mind. Biting his lip, he forced himself to look up, sensing Secka's growing impatience and not wanting to annoy him any more than he already had. "Who...who died in it?" he choked out.

“Who died?” Secka frowned. “Well, let’s see, quite a few kraguers died...”

Jeb shuddered and looked away. “Which ones?”

Secka flicked his tail in irritation. “I don’t know who exactly, just that a couple of them got scorched and died.”

Jeb flinched at his cool, exasperated tone of voice and felt a shiver travel down his spine. Why were they even talking about the loss of lives as if it didn’t even matter? Biting back his own grief and guilt, he forced himself to look up and took a deep breath. “Isn’t there anyone...in particular that you know of that died in the fire?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. They say Zerone’s old wife-to-be got caught it in, but according to most of them, she died later on. I don’t know the details. It was a while ago.”

Jeb blinked several times, feeling a jolt of shock go through him. “Carita?”

“Yeah, her, I don’t know.” Secka flattened his ears in annoyance and glanced impatiently back at the outlaws waiting for him to return. “I was exiled a long time before that happened, so I was a criminal when that fire started. I didn’t keep up with what went on back at the Court.” He hesitated, then frowned and narrowed his eyes. “Why are you suddenly so interested in who your stupid fire killed anyway?” Before he could protest, Secka rolled his eyes and sighed. “Okay, okay, *Zerone’s* fire.”

Jeb flattened his ears in alarm. “I can’t tell you.” The instant the words slipped out, he cursed himself for seeming so secretive when he barely even had anything to hide.

Secka raised an eyebrow, then just shook his head. “Fine, it doesn’t break my heart if you don’t want to tell me. I’m out of here. Don’t bother me.” After giving Jeb one last dark, warning look, he turned around and stalked back toward the outlaws lingering on the edge of the basin, his black-tipped tail flicking irritably back and forth.

Jeb blinked, barely noticing Secka’s departure, and padded absentmindedly back toward his cave den. Pausing in the jagged entrance, he gazed out at the Spring without seeing the eerie shadows at the back or hearing the cold sneering voices of Secka’s thugs. He was too caught up in his thoughts to notice any of his creepy surroundings. His mind whirled with wonder and unease when he thought about what Secka had said.

Keruni's mother had died the day Keruni had been born, before she had gotten a chance to meet her. Several months before the fire had ignited, back when Jeb was living in the Court, the Emperor had announced his plans to marry another kraguer named Carita. Keruni had despised Carita. Every time he hung out with her, she had told him how much she hated her. She had muttered bitterly about how she had tried to tell her father to stay away from her, but Zerone had never listened.

Several months later, the fire had ravaged the forest, turning it into nothing but a land of destruction. Somewhere along the line, Carita had died. The news about her death had been broken after Jeb and his family had been sent to the Spring since the kraguers in Zerone's Court had been more caught up in punishing the ones they believed had ignited the fire. But from what little tidbits Jeb had picked up about her death, she seemed to have died sometime around the fire. No one had told him exactly *what* she had died from.

A shiver raced up Jeb's spine and a wave of cold fear washed over him. Had the fire had something to do with her death? Had Zerone accidentally killed her? He shuddered and stared down at his paws, suddenly feeling a tingle of guilt and grief about hating Zerone for framing him. Maybe he had had no choice. With the guilt of what he might have done and the anger of the animals, maybe it had been his only option.

Dark, unidentifiable figures spread out in a huge, blurred courtyard. Huge, imposing stalactites and stalagmites rose up at the back of the enormous court, seeming to form a towering stone mansion. Saderia drew closer to the den without realizing it until she stood directly in front of its blurry pillars. Through a twisted entrance in the den, she could see three tiny, shadowed figures standing inside. The eerie green and gray eyes of the largest blurred figure gleamed in the dim light. In front of him stood an even smaller figure with misty green eyes and a slightly taller figure beside her with cold blue eyes.

"I'll be back soon," the biggest one murmured, peering sternly down at the smallest figure. Looking at the blue-eyed one, he added, "I know you'll take care of her."

Fear burned in the eyes of the smallest figure. "Daddy, don't leave me with her!"

The green and gray-eyed creature glared down at her. "Enough! We've talked about this. You have to stop thinking so badly of your soon-to-be stepmother."

"But—"

"Don't worry, I'll take care of her," cooed the blue-eyed figure. An eerie gleam flashed in her eyes as she turned to the green-eyed creature. "It's all right, *sweetie*. We can do lots of fun stuff. You know how I'm looking forward to being your stepmother."

The green-eyed one seemed to shrink down onto the floor, seeming even smaller than before. "Daddy, why won't you listen? I'm telling you, she's evil—"

"Enough," the bigger one snapped, his eyes darkening. "I have important things to do. Don't give her a hard time or you're in big trouble." Before the younger one could protest, the larger figure whirled around and stalked toward the entrance. His blurred, shadowed form passed by Saderia like the rustle of a cold breeze.

The smaller figure backed away, her eyes gleaming with terror. The taller creature stalked forward and towered over her with glinting eyes of ice. "It didn't work again, *sweetie*. When are you going to give up?" the taller one snarled in a darker, chilling voice.

The younger one narrowed her eyes. "When are you? Leave my Daddy alone!"

"Whatever are you talking about?" she replied in a fake innocent voice. "What's the matter, *darling*? Are you afraid of getting your pretty throne snatched away?"

Her eyes flashed with pain and anger. "You're going to hurt my Daddy!" she cried. "Why can't you just leave him alone? He's going to figure it out eventually!"

"By then it'll be too late." A sneer spread across the older one's face. "Now go to your room and don't bother me. You know your punishment if you keep this up." She put on a mock sad expression and pretended to sniffle. "*I'm so sorry, but your sweet daughter ran away from home! She might even be dead!*"

The little one shivered. "You can't—"

"I can and I would. Now get out of my sight and be a *good little girl* and I'll be nice and tell your father how *sweet* you were."

The smaller one glared at her for a long time before whirling around and racing away. She ghosted up a flight of chipped stone steps. The tiny shadow ducked into a room at the top of the long, rocky flight of stairs filled with a tiny stone slab of a bed and a rocky drawer close beside it. Soft sounds of conversation floated in through a rough-edged window on the right of the room covered with crisscrossing stalagmites.

Desperation flashed in the blurred eyes of the figure as she pulled open the drawer. Her green irises lit up with hope and she reached in to pull something out, but before Saderia could see it, the world around her began to dim. A wild, crackling sound boomed through the air, sending shivers down her spine. The scene disappeared before her eyes, plunging her into pure darkness and surrounding her with a loud, terrifying roar.

Saderia's eyes flew open and she jerked upward in alarm. Her heart beat frantically as she looked in all directions, searching for danger. The dull brown walls of her room sat undisturbed and the cracks zigzagging through the stone seemed empty of anything sinister. Taking a deep breath, she slowly looked out into the main part of the den and didn't see anyone stalking her. The soft, dusty light shimmering on the rocky couch told her it was morning. She let out a shaky sigh, trying to calm the frantic beating of her heart. The scenes she had witnessed flashed through her mind, sending shivers down her spine. The loud crackling noise burned in her mind and seemed to echo in the silence around her. Biting her lip, she closed her eyes, knowing she had had a Dream.

Why now? Anger flared in her chest, making the memories of her Dream disappear. In the weeks that had passed since she had come to the forest, she hadn't caught a glimpse of anything prophetic in her sleep. All she had seen were cruel canines ripping Dingo apart, a nightmare that had already happened. The only things she had seen were memories of the past, not a Dream of the future. Instead of giving her visions to help her prepare for the hardships ahead, her Dreams had left her in the dark. Her first Dream had warned her about the flood that destroyed the Home of the Leopards way too late. Had Loki not come to her for help, they wouldn't have made it there. The leopards might be dead. Her Dreams had given up on her. Why shouldn't she give up on them?

She laid back with a long sigh, then paused when she heard a soft scraping sound. Turning, she saw Dash appear in the entrance to her room. He looked out at the main room then glanced up at her, his amber eyes worried. She stared uneasily back at him.

“Loki’s here,” he murmured. “Maeta’s back.”

Days had passed since the horrible disaster had destroyed the Home of the Leopards, but the memories of the violent floodwater still haunted her. Images of the vicious, muddy currents surging through the clearing seemed to intertwine with memories of gritty water thrashing the desert sand. Thoughts of Loki’s stunned face were replaced with flashes of Dingo’s stern light brown gaze so quickly it was as if the two disasters had melded together. Memories of the forest flood and the desert flood both nagged at the back of her mind, each new memory making her wince more than the last.

The leopards had settled into the bobcat neighborhood, waiting for the flood to run its course and end, but even if the flood had gone, Saderia knew its scars would linger. Karenisha and Makero had visited the bobcats many times to check on the leopards during their daily schedule. If they came home at night, they told stories of how the leopards were doing fine in their temporary home and how they had seen Loki marching through the neighborhood to check on the leopards. Saderia tried to smile when they told her the leopards were doing fine, but when she thought about the spotted animals, all she could think of was the image of them drenched and huddled together in the dark woods. She wanted to believe it when her parents told her everything seemed to be all right, but a dangerous warning burning in her mind told her appearances were false.

Saderia brushed a leafy branch out of her path and paused. Beside her, Loki stopped and stared out in front of them, her green eyes dull and clouded. The soft, crackling sound of paw steps behind her died away, indicating that Karenisha and Dash, who had been following behind, had stopped as well. The four of them had followed Loki to the Home of the Leopards to greet Maeta, but now, seeing the dark, clouded look in her eyes and her hesitation to continue, Saderia could tell something was very wrong.

Loki sighed and flicked her tail toward a clump of dense bushes hiding the Home of the Leopards. She nodded at Saderia, signaling for her

to go first. Saderia hesitated for a long moment, then cautiously stepped forward and pushed past the towering trees and bushes. She froze at the entrance to the Home of the Leopards and stared out in shock.

Fallen trees littered the ground, digging deep scars through the sparse grass with thick, leafless branches. Light brown patches covered the trees in the places where the bark had been ripped off of them. Snapped branches and twigs laid across the clearing. The chipped, rocky remains of the stone dens were scattered all throughout the neighborhood, and the wooden houses and supplies had been swept away completely. Splinters of drenched wood had lodged themselves in the logs and tiny, broken pieces of boards had been thrown around the clearing and pounded by waves into the ground. Only a few small, rocky dens had been spared by the vicious currents of the flood.

Spotted animals weaved their way in and out of the wreckage and roamed aimlessly around the clearing. A few leopards picked at the rocks and boards laying around. Some carried broken leaves and twigs to the edge of the clearing and dumped them in a pile to clean up the neighborhood. Several other leopards pushed half-heartedly at the huge, fallen trees in a vain effort to move them. A dark current of shock seemed to surge through the clearing like the waves of the flood. The leopards looked on bleakly, barely seeming to notice when the Queen, Dash, and Loki stepped into the clearing.

“Maeta’s staying in there,” Loki murmured, gesturing toward one of the still-standing dens. “The leopards who owned it gave it to her. She needed it more than them.”

Saderia nodded and followed her over to the rocky den. Karenisha and Dash trailed behind her until the four of them stood outside the jagged entrance. A dark shadow fell over the den as Loki glanced inside. “Maeta?” she called. “I’ve brought them.”

A soft, tired sigh sounded from inside the den. “Thank you, Loki. Bring them in.”

Loki glanced toward the three of them with dark green eyes. She lifted her tail toward the gaping entrance of the den, gesturing for them to go inside. Saderia cast her a lingering glance, feeling a chill seep through her body, before cautiously stepping inside. The dull gray walls of the

small, rocky den spread out in front of her, and she could hear the soft, scraping sounds of her family's paws against the stony floor behind her.

At a tap from Loki, Saderia turned to the right and padded around a corner. She paused in the doorway and let the others slowly pad up behind her. In front of her was a tiny, makeshift bedroom with a bed made of a long, stone slab and softened with a thick down of soft-looking leaves. The proud leader of the leopards laid at the very back of the bed. Beside her was a tiny orange cub.

Saderia stood frozen in amazement, staring at the young cub. It had buried its face deep into Maeta's spotted side and tucked its furry paws beside its cheek, hiding its fuzzy face from view. Its tiny tail laid still against the soft leaves of the bed. Dark brown spots dappled the cub's orange fur and small tail. A tiny smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. The cub must be Marlina's cub. But where was Marlina? The smile slowly faded as she stared at the tiny leopard cub. Where was its mother?

Soft fur brushed against her own and she looked up to see Karenisha glide into the room. The Queen hesitated in the entrance and stared down at the cub in surprise. Loki slipped past her and padded slowly toward the makeshift bed to stand beside the leopard leader while Dash crept up behind Saderia and Karenisha to peer into the room.

Maeta slowly looked up at them, her brown eyes dull and clouded. A shiver of unease ran down Saderia's spine when she noticed tiny tears shimmering on the very edges of the leader's eyes. It seemed to cost her a lot of effort just to raise her head to look up at the royal family and when she spoke, her voice sounded tired and weak.

"Saderia, Dash, Queen Karenisha," Maeta murmured. "I'm sure you're all wondering how we're coping after the flood. Everyone is doing well enough. The leopards have recovered from the poisoned water and we've moved back into our home. We'll start building up our homes again as soon as we get new supplies. Loki did a wonderful job leading the leopards while I was away. I returned just last night."

Karenisha dipped her head. "I'm glad to hear things are going well, Maeta. Makero and I would be happy to stop by to help you rebuild the Home of the Leopards in any way we can." She paused and stared intently at the cub, but didn't say a word.



Maeta met her gaze knowingly. “You’re wondering about this cub. And Marlina.”

Karenisha said nothing and continued to stare at the tiny cub. Without realizing it, Saderia found herself holding her breath and let it out slowly, letting her eyes wander to the cub. A dark cloud of tension and sorrow seemed to hang in the air.

Maeta took a deep breath. “You all know Marlina began to give birth during the flood. She was in our den when she started to have her cub. A few moments later, the flood hit us...the den was destroyed within minutes. I tried to get her out and shouted for Loki to run for help since she only caught the outskirts of the flood. I managed to get her out, but by then Marlina had already swallowed some of the poisonous water.”

She paused then muttered in a soft, nearly inaudible voice, “My sister has always been a bit frail and delicate and the journey along with other things had taken a toll on her. Hateko’s... *incident*...that weakened her a lot. I managed to get her out of the flood, but I was low on supplies that could help her. I remembered that you had set up a sort of makeshift hospital where animals who used to be doctors would stay and where there were more supplies. After I took her there, she asked me if I would help her take care of the cub and I said yes. She asked if I would take care of the cub if something happened. I knew what would happen. I said yes.” Maeta paused and stared down at her paws for what seemed like ages. After a long moment, she slowly turned to the cub and placed a paw on its back. “The cub’s name is Tawny. Marlina had been thinking of a name for her ever since she found out she was pregnant in the old forest. She told me Hateko had come up with the name Tawny and that that was what she wanted her cub to be called.”

Saderia stared at Maeta, feeling her heart sink. She glanced at the sleeping cub and opened her mouth to speak, but couldn’t say a word. She felt her blood run cold when she saw the sorrow glimmering in Maeta’s eyes. Where was Marlina?

Karenisha slowly looked down at the sleeping cub. “Hi, Tawny.”

“She’s cute,” Dash murmured, gazing down at the cub. Everyone stared at the cub. It was easier than looking at Maeta and trying to meet her dull, grief-stricken eyes.

“She is,” Maeta whispered. She took a deep breath then glanced around at each one of them. Saderia tried to hold her gaze, but had to look away when she saw the sorrow in her clouded brown eyes. Karenisha held her gaze quietly, her amber eyes clouded with sadness. Maeta slowly tore her gaze from the Queen and looked back at the cub. “You’ve all guessed it,” she said softly. “Marlina is dead. She died giving birth.”

It felt like a wave had crashed into Saderia. Digging her claws into the rock, she used all of her strength not to back away as a cold chill shot through her and turned her body to ice. Dead. The cub’s mother was dead. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Her eyes flicked to the cub and shock and sorrow seemed to burn in her chest. Another animal was dead. Gone forever. The cub was an orphan.

Saderia tried to choke back her sadness. She almost never blinked as she stared at the tiny cub. What kind of life would she have growing up in this new forest, dodging disasters and never knowing her mother? How was this cub supposed to go out to play in the forest when a disaster could destroy her just like her mom? Her whole body felt cold and numb. This forest would be the only home the cub would ever know. Her home was a place that could hurt her, not a place she could avoid being hurt. What would it be like for the cub to grow up in a place where she could never feel safe? The new forest was supposed to be their sanctuary. Instead it had destroyed a leopard and orphaned another.

Karenisha took a deep breath and let out a quiet sigh. “I’m very sorry for your loss, Maeta. I know it must be hard for you to lose your sister. But I know you, along with all the leopards, will make sure Tawny is taken care of and given the best life possible.”

Saderia glanced at Maeta, then looked away. Pain burned in her chest when she caught a glimpse of the leopard leader’s lifeless brown eyes. Seeing the agony in her dull gaze reminded her too much of her own loss. The shocked look in her devastated expression only made her think of the raw wound in her own heart. Karenisha’s words were kind, but they couldn’t help. She couldn’t feel the shock, disbelief, and desolation that haunted Maeta the same way it haunted Saderia when she thought of Dingo.

“Is there anything we can do?” Saderia looked up at the sound of Dash’s soft voice and saw the dark lion staring at Maeta with wide, sorrow-filled eyes.

Maeta let out a long sigh. "No, I'll take care of Tawny and I'll be fine on my own, but thank you, Queen Karenisha and Prince Dash."

Beside the bed, Loki stood silent, watching the cub rest. After a long moment, she slowly looked up with clouded green eyes and met Saderia's gaze. "We'll all be fine. Maeta just wanted you to know what happened. That's all. We'll take care of Tawny."

"Take good care of her," Saderia murmured softly, letting her eyes lock on the cub. She took a deep, shaky breath. "I'm sorry, Maeta. If I can help any way at all..."

Maeta held up a paw. "Thank you, Princess Saderia, but I will be all right and the leopards will, as well. You and the royal family have other matters to attend to and the leopards and I can handle ourselves. It's enough that you know." She hesitated, then turned back to Karenisha and cleared her throat, her expression hardening. "Things are going well as far as repairs and I've got it under control. You're free to check on us later on, but I'm sure now you've got other places you need to be and others to attend to."

Karenisha nodded slowly. "All right, Maeta. We'll check in on your progress later and try to get you new supplies as soon as we can. Until then...goodbye. And good luck."

Maeta dipped her head. "Thank you, Queen Karenisha."

Karenisha gave her a tight smile and nodded back. She gave Tawny another soft brush of her tail and smiled to Loki before flicking her tail toward Saderia and Dash, gesturing for them to leave. Dash blinked before starting to back away. Saderia let her gaze linger on Maeta, Tawny, and Loki for a moment later. "Goodbye," she murmured.

Loki half-heartedly lifted her tail in farewell. Maeta looked up and managed a weak smile. "Goodbye, Saderia. And good luck to you as well."

Saderia nodded, then turned around and ducked out of the den, holding her head down and closing her eyes. She didn't say a word as she padded slowly after Dash and her mother, leaving the leopard leader behind. What could she possibly say?

"I can't stand her."

A high, cold voice whispered through the darkness around her. Slowly, Saderia opened her eyes and the blackness surrounding her faded

away. Large trees rose up around her and thick, dense clumps of bushes sprung up in every direction. Strange multicolor leaves of different colors rustled in a light breeze. Sunlight shimmered down onto the whitish grass through holes in the thick canopy. Pricking her ears, Saderia could just barely hear the soft, almost unnoticeable sound of paw steps thudding against the grass. She looked around and turned toward the sound of the voice, then froze. Through the trees, she could see two dark shadows padding through the woods.

The green eyes of one figure flashed. "I have to do something to keep her away."

"Like what?" The other tiny shadow tipped his head to the side in confusion. Saderia froze when the sunlight cast a glow across the creature's nervous blue and green eyes. "You're...you're not going to do anything horrible, right?"

"I don't know yet." The figure paused, then glared at the other. "I guess *you* don't really care. You probably couldn't care less if that psycho killed me and Daddy!"

Hurt flashed in the other shadow's blue and green eyes. "That's not true!"

"Sure it is. Either that or you'd just hide and watch like a coward! I hate you!" The green-eyed figure snarled at the other, then whirled around and darted away.

"Wait!" the other figure cried, whipping around to stare after her. Shock and distress gleamed in both green and blue eyes before the eerie, colorful forest around them began to disappear into a black void of darkness. Panic burned in her chest, but before she could cry out, the gloom around her began to fade away into a new scene.

Stony walls rose up on either side of her. A rocky floor spread out in front of her and blurred shadows milled around the plaza. In the distance, she could see a huge mansion covered with stalactites and stalagmites rising up over the plaza. A flash of green eyes caught her gaze as a dark shadow flew past the others. The green-eyed figure fled through the sea of blurred shadows until she finally slowed in front of a huge fire pit in the center of the plaza. A bright orange flame leapt up from the circular pit and flickered in the air while the green-eyed figure stopped to admire it. Her green eyes grew wide with amazement as she watched the dancing flame. The

powerful light of the fire twinkled in her eyes, turning them from a nervous light green to a dark, blazing red. The other shadows seemed to disappear around her as she watched the fire, never daring to blink.

“I’m all alone,” she whispered. “Except for the pretty dancing flame...”

Saderia’s eyes flew open. Letting out a gasp, she abruptly sat up on the hard, cold bed and looked around wildly. Dawn light filtered in through the entrance to her rocky den, illuminating the stone couches and spotting the jagged edges surrounding the hole to her room with dusty, yellow light. Her room was silent and empty, but the memory of the flickering flame and the wide eyes of the shadowed creature nagged at the back of her mind. Shoving the thoughts away, she let out a low growl and pushed herself out of bed.

A week had passed since she had seen Tawny and learned of Marlina’s fate. The news had already spread to Cia, Uncle Jash, and Makero, as well as most of the forest. Everyone seemed saddened by the incident, but Saderia doubted any of them could truly understand the grief Maeta and the leopards must feel, nor the guilt that haunted Saderia. How could they? They hadn’t had the chance to save Marlina. Only she had. If her Dreams had warned her just an hour earlier, she knew she could have gotten Marlina away from the flood and the water that had weakened her. Maybe then Tawny would have a mother. But her Dreams had left her in the dark until it was too late just like they had done with Dingo. They had abandoned her twice when she needed them most and left her powerless to save innocent lives. First it was a friend, and now a mother. Who else might depend on her only to be let down when she was unable to save them?

With a long sigh, she tried to shake away her dark thoughts and padded out into the central part of the den. On the couch just a few paces away from her room sat Karenisha, Makero, Cia, Uncle Jash, and Dash. Untouched pieces of fruit lay at the paws of Dash and the three tigers as they stared worriedly at the Queen. At the sound of her soft paw steps, Dash pricked his ears and looked back. A hopeful smile spread across his face.

“Saderia, come over here,” he called, beckoning her over with his tail.

She frowned suspiciously. "What's going on?" With an uneasy glance, she leapt up onto the couch beside Dash, trying to ignore the hopeful glances they gave her.

"I had a Dream," Karenisha murmured. "It wasn't as clear as your Dreams since my Dream sense isn't as powerful, but...I think something bad is going to happen."

Saderia blinked in surprise. "Why? What'd you see?"

Karenisha shrugged nervously. "I saw these...strange, dark figures. It was nighttime and I was out in the woods. There were all these shadows and the woods were so dense I could just barely see where I was. But there were these tiny lights shining all around me in the distance. They weren't too bright, but they were enough to make out most of my surroundings. I looked around and I saw flashes of these dark, shadowed figures walking through the woods. I caught a glimpse of them darting out from behind a tree, then disappearing behind another one. I kept catching sight of them all around me out of the corner of my eye, but then I heard this...snap...and all the lights disappeared. I was left in nothing but darkness..." She trailed off with a dark look of unease.

"Did you have any Dreams?" Makero asked, turning to Saderia with curious green eyes. "Maybe then we'll have a bit more information."

Saderia blinked and looked around at all of them, seeing hope glimmering in their eyes. It was as if they were sure she would do or say something to save them the way she always did. Her eyes narrowed with pain. The last time she had tried to be someone's 'great savior' she had failed horribly. Did they expect her to come up with another 'great plan' so more animals could die? She gritted her teeth and looked away. "No, I haven't had any Dreams. I haven't had a single Dream since we got to this forest." She gave them each a hard glare, as if to warn them not to question and hide any guilt in her expression.

"Oh," Karenisha murmured, looking down at her paws. "I'm sorry, I just thought that maybe... I guess it's just nothing then. I mean it could have just been a normal dream. It's been a long time since I've had Dreams, so maybe..." She broke off with a sheepish sigh. "Sorry, everyone, for getting you so worried."

The four of them exchanged uneasy glances, unconvinced.

Makero rested his tail gently on Karenisha's shoulder. "Are you sure? We can try to go looking for these...figures if it's necessary."

Karenisha shook her head. "It's nothing really, but if you want to make sure, we can keep our eyes open for anything suspicious."

Makero frowned. "I think we should do a quick patrol of the forest. Just to check things out and make sure everything's all right," he added. "We need to check on the neighborhoods anyway. We can just ask them if they've seen anything suspicious."

Karenisha hesitated, then gave a slight nod. "All right. I suppose it can't hurt." She glanced around at her family. "Would any of you like to come with us?"

Dash quickly looked up. "I'll come with you."

"We'll stay here," Cia said with a flick of her tail toward Uncle Jash. "If you three are going to be out, we should stay behind in case one of the forest animals needs help."

"Good idea." The Queen glanced at her daughter. "Saderia? What about you?"

All eyes turned to her. Saderia glanced around at her family, feeling her fur prickle with discomfort at their hopeful gazes. She glanced down at her paws, but she could still feel their eyes burning into her fur. "I'll stay," she muttered.

"Well, okay," Karenisha said with a confused frown. Glancing toward the entrance of the den, she flicked her tail at Dash and Makero. "We better get going. Come on." She looked over at Saderia and added, "We'll be back home as soon as we can."

"Bye," she muttered, not looking up.

Karenisha watched her for a moment longer before slowly turning and striding toward the entrance. Dash and Makero hurried after her, giving Saderia curious glances as they passed. With a suppressed sigh, Saderia crept off to her room. The curious stares of her aunt and uncle followed her and lingered even once she had reached her bed. A growl rose in her throat as she crawled onto the rocky bed and curled into a ball. Outside, she could hear the paw steps of Dash and her parents fading in the distance. She could still feel her aunt and uncle's eyes burning into her fur and had to bite back a scream.

Everyone was always watching her with the same expectant or concerned expression, as if they thought she had something to hide. As if she knew the answers any more than they did. Dash's worried eyes were constantly burning into her fur and Karenisha and Makero were always giving her uneasy glances when they thought she wasn't looking. Cia and Uncle Jash always seemed to be watching her with an expectant look. Anger burned in her chest. Why was everyone constantly watching her?

Were they expecting her to start chanting prophecies? Did they expect her to reel off a solution to all the problems of the new forest? Were they waiting for her to solve all their problems, as if she actually had a clue what to do? Or was she a convict? Was this a punishment for how she had more or less killed Dingo and let another animal die without a chance to meet her cub? She buried her face in her paws. She should be able to come up with plans. She should be able to solve the forest's problems. She should have found a way to save Dingo and Marlina. But she couldn't. She couldn't do *anything*. She was trapped in her room by family she should normally trust. She had even trapped herself. What was she supposed to do if she couldn't even trust herself?

"Saderia?" She froze at the sound of the soft, hesitant voice, her dark thoughts floating away. Blinking rapidly, she lifted her head and looked up at the entrance of her room where a dark brown lion stood motionless, watching her. Her eyes narrowed when she saw the worry glimmering in Dash's eyes, and a low growl began to rise in her throat.

"What are you still doing here?" she spat. "I thought you went with Mom and Dad." She curled her lip. "What? Did Mom send you back here to baby-sit me?"

Dash blinked several times. His glowing amber eyes bored into her and he stood rigidly still, his eyes narrowed with concern. Saderia bit her lip and looked away, but she could still feel his creepy stare scorching her back and she knew he was still watching her. He was always watching her. Always *expecting* something. Anger burned in her chest and before she could stop to think, she let out a furious hiss, whirled around, and leapt off the bed. Her fur bristled with rage as she stalked toward him and bared her fangs. "Get out of my room!" she hissed. "And stop *watching* me or I'll claw your face off!"



Dash blinked in shock and took a step back. “Saderia, what’s gotten into you?”

Saderia let out a furious growl. “Just get out! Go play Prince for Mom and Dad and the forest and *leave me alone!*”

He stared at her for a long moment, his eyes wide with surprise. “Saderia, what’s happened to you?” he whispered. “What happened to the brave, determined Saderia who took everything in stride and insisted we keep going? What happened to the Saderia that would do anything for her forest and always put others first even when things were hard?”

She narrowed her eyes and turned away. “That Saderia died with Dingo.”

“Well, how can I bring her back to life? There’s got to be something I can do.” He shook his head helplessly. “I can’t go on doing this every day, Saderia.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Doing what?”

“Standing by and watching you keep moping around and being so miserable. Ever since you got here, you’ve been miserable. You barely say a word to anybody and you don’t Dream...I don’t even think I’ve seen you *smile* since we got to this forest!”

She stayed silent and coldly narrowed her eyes.

He stared back at her unchallenged. “You think I haven’t noticed? You think Karenisha and Makero haven’t noticed? What about the whole forest—you think they haven’t started to suspect something’s wrong? Your family is *worried* about you and they’ve tried to help you. Karenisha’s tried to talk to you, but you just shut everyone out. I...I keep hoping that one day you’ll at least look a little happier or that I’ll see that old gleam in your eyes when you get excited about some adventure you want to drag me on, or...” He let out a long, sad sigh and hesitated for a long moment. “Look, I know you’re upset, and I know how much it hurt to lose Dingo, but every day you get worse and worse, and I can’t stand to see you like that. It wasn’t your fault. A lot of time has passed, and you have to accept it and try to move on. Maybe then you’ll let one of us talk to you.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I don’t need one of you to talk to me. What did Mom say about me anyway when she sent you back here?”

“Karenisha didn’t tell me anything. I just knew something was wrong today just like every day. I didn’t want to say anything to you in case

I made it worse, but I just don't know what to do anymore. If you won't try to accept this for you, couldn't you at least try for me and your family and the forest and everyone else who cares about you?"

She hissed. "Look, I don't have to do anything just because the forest and my family need someone to save them or whatever it is they want me to do. I'm sick of them counting on me for everything and expecting me to be their great hero because guess what? I'm not. I never have been. The whole prophecy? Nothing but a lie."

He blinked at her in shock. "*That's* what you think?"

"The prophecy..."

"The prophecy doesn't matter!" he interrupted. "The prophecy means nothing to me! What I can't believe is that you think that the only reason Karenisha and Makero and everyone else wants you to get better and stop being so miserable is because they need you to save them or that they *expect* that from you! They want you to be happier because they love you. Because they care about you and hate seeing you so miserable. Don't you know how much it hurts your parents and your aunt and uncle when you're so upset *every single day*? And how they know that they can't talk to you or do anything to help you? There're as clueless as I am as to how to make you feel better, Saderia, and it's torture.

"In case you haven't noticed, they're already stressed with ruling the kingdom and trying to keep everyone from panicking. *They* themselves are panicking. They've been running all over the forest trying to rebuild a wrecked home or see to somebody that got hurt, and all that time they've got to smile like they're confident that this forest will be in perfect condition by next week or next month or whatever keeps the animals happy. They've barely touched their fruit, they're getting thinner, and they're suffering.

"The forest animals are shaken enough from the hunters and the desert and now the disasters, so Karenisha and Makero have to make it look like this forest is a great change from all that. Do you think they actually believe that? No, and I hate to break it to you, but this place isn't great." He paused and let out a long sigh. "The King and Queen have to pretend like it's all okay while they're staying up all night and all day trying to get everything under control. And on top of all that, they have to constantly worry about their daughter, who keeps getting more and more miserable by

the day, and all the time they have to decide which is more important: their daughter or their forest. They can only take care of one at a time.” He looked up and met her gaze. “Do you understand now?”

Saderia stood in silence. She stared at him as his words sunk in and a deep guilt began to rise in her chest. For a long time, neither of them said a word. Blinking rapidly, Saderia opened her mouth to try to tell him—what? That she was sorry? How could she ever try to apologize and tell him how much she had needed him to say that? That she had never realized just how hard her parents were working and how much it hurt them when she remained miserable? She felt her heart ache with regret. How could she have turned on Dash after all he had done for her? He had sacrificed everything for her and he had lost more than she had. They had both lost their forest and Dingo, but Saderia still had her whole family. Dash’s father was long dead and she knew there was still a part of him that still missed him. No one knew for sure what had happened to his mother either.

Dash stared at her for a moment longer. When she looked up, she could see a tiny glimmer of hope shining in his eyes. Saderia hesitated for a long moment before letting out a soft sigh. “I’m sorry, Dash. I never realized...You’re right. About everything.” She let out a shaky breath. “I never wanted to be like this. I just don’t know how to go back. Not after Dingo...” She trailed off and winced at the thought of her lost friend.

Dash watched her for a moment longer, then gave her a tentative smile. “It’s all right, Saderia. I understand.” He touched the furry tip of his tail to her shoulder. “Maybe I can help you be *you* again. Maybe we can both help each other.”

She managed a weak smile. “Maybe we can.”

Dash grinned and opened his mouth to speak, then paused. Saderia froze and looked up over Dash’s shoulder at the same time he looked back. Near the front of their den, they could hear paws thudding rapidly across the stony floor. High, excited voices sounded from just outside. Before they could move to check it out, Cia poked her head around the entrance to Saderia’s room, making both of them jump in surprise. A wide, eager smile spread across her face and her blue eyes glimmered with excitement.

“Saderia, Dash!” she exclaimed. “Your uncle and I were talking with two panthers. They said Karenisha and Makero sent them to tell us something!”

Saderia blinked in surprise. “Why? What’s going on?”

Cia beamed. “The animals that have been helping Karenisha and Makero with the forest just got a chance to talk to them when they went by their neighborhood. They said that starting tomorrow, more than half the forest will have electricity!” Her eyes shone with happiness. “We’re one step closer to where we used to be.”

# Chapter Six

## Too Many Problems

Saderia slowly blinked open her eyes and stared out across the dark, blurry room. Letting out a long yawn, she stretched on her bed, feeling her paws brush a soft, downy blanket. Glancing down, she felt a tingle of relief and happiness at the sight of the thin, baby blue fabric draped across the stone slab of her bed. The dim, fuzzy light in her room flickered almost unnoticeably on and off. Looking up, she felt a ghost of a smile creep across her face when she saw a naked light bulb hanging and humming above her.

“That’s what I’ve been waiting to see!”

Saderia turned to see Dash standing in the entrance to her room, his own blanket draped over his shoulders. His amber eyes sparkled with happiness and she couldn’t help but smile hesitantly back. Another week had passed by, but the days and nights had been brightened by the new lights Karenisha and Makero had brought home. Surrounded by the warm glow of the light bulbs, Saderia couldn’t help but feel a little better, and despite the fact that the same dull walls loomed around her, the small, rocky den had begun to feel more like home. Even though she was still wary of the newfound peacefulness, she felt a tiny glimmer of hope. Maybe this forest really would become a home.

Dash caught her eye and grinned. “Come on,” he called. “Let’s go get breakfast.”

Saderia nodded before leaping off the bed. Looking back, she gave the smooth blanket a quick tug and let it flutter down onto her back. Peering out from underneath a clump of soft blue fabric, she smiled at Dash and followed him out into the main room of the den. Karenisha, Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash sat around the large boulder that served as a table, eagerly biting into pieces of fresh fruit. At the sound of their soft paw steps, the four of them looked up and smiled.

Waving a paw, Karenisha tossed Saderia a ripe piece of fruit, then patted the ground beside her, indicating for her to sit. With Dash following

close behind her, she sat beside her mother and leaned back to look around at her family.

“Mom? Dad?” She paused and glanced over at Dash. “Is it okay if I go and see Loki today? To see how she and the rest of the leopards are doing?”

Karenisha hesitated and exchanged a quick glance with Makero before slowly nodding. “Yes, you can go, but only if Dash goes with you.”

“I will,” Dash said quickly, giving Saderia a bright smile.

“Okay,” Makero said, nodding at them. “Just watch out for all the disasters.”

“We will,” Saderia assured them, smiling a tight smile. Flicking her tail at Dash, she stepped back from the craggy table and waved a quick goodbye to her family. She smiled when they waved back, then rapidly tossed her blanket onto the edge of the table next to Dash’s and bounded off toward the gaping entrance of the den. The bright, burning light of the sun greeted them the instant they set foot outside. The rough, prickly grass beneath them poked and prodded at their paws, but Saderia ignored it. Tall trees and dense undergrowth loomed in the woods ahead of them, but when she saw the slightly worn grass and a part in the thick greenery, she realized a path was beginning to form.

Walking side by the side, the two of them ducked into the woods. Trusting her paws to lead her to the right place, Saderia let her eyes wander to the colorful undergrowth around her. Bushes in every color from a vibrant pink to a deep blue puffed out at them. Green flowers with thick purple and gray stems peeked up from beneath the blue-tinted grass and yellow, thorn-laden weeds crept up the trunks of the trees.

Walking past a patch of bright orange grass, Saderia felt her eyes widen at the true strangeness of the forest. A few paces in front of her stood an upside-down tree. Its roots rose wildly up into the sky like a tangled clump of snakes, while a few feet in front of it the dirt was broken by a bright, leaf-covered branch poking up out of the ground. Another live, healthy tree seemed to be growing in the shape of a spiral. Thick, nearly unbreakable vines hung heavily from the canopy above or stuck up out of the ground like plant stalks. The entire woods was filled with strange-colored, deformed plants. It was as if someone had taken a normal forest and completely reversed it to form this strange, new world.

For a moment, Saderia couldn't help but wonder if this forest was normal and her own forest had been the oddity. But how could that be when her own home had been so much safer? There was something seriously wrong with the new forest. What she couldn't figure out was *why* it was like this. What had caused this forest to be so strange?

"Dash," she whispered. "Why do you think these plants are like this?"

Dash looked up and glanced around at their surroundings, narrowing his eyes in confusion. "I have no idea," he murmured. "But this whole forest is weird, with the disasters and everything. And..." He hesitated for a long moment, a dark, uneasy look on his face. "Don't you think it's kind of odd that no one was here when we got here?" He met her gaze with shadowed amber eyes. "That this forest was uninhabited?"

She blinked and felt a sharp tingle of nervousness. He was right. Even the desert had been inhabited and it had been just as hard to adapt to as the new forest. "That is strange," she murmured. Her eyes narrowed. "Have you been thinking about this a lot?"

He shrugged and gave the forest around him a cold, suspicious glance. "Sometimes I wonder if maybe this forest isn't as uninhabited as we think."

She looked up sharply, feeling shock burn in her chest. No one had seen any signs of other life so far, but what if he was right? What if there was something else in the forest with them, watching them? The dingoes had already shown her how cruel some animals could be. What if animals as evil as the desert dogs were hiding out in the forest?

Feeling a shiver race up her spine, she tried to shake the thoughts out of her head, but the eerie ideas lingered. A painful memory nagged at the back of her mind. Thinking back without meaning to, she froze as she was transported back in time. She could remember being surrounded by endless sand and burning with the scorching heat of the desert sun, but both sensations seemed to fade into the background. In front of her stood two dingoes just the way she remembered them. A sneer had spread across the face of the dark brown, almost black dingo who stood facing the other, and his amber eyes had gleamed with triumph. The shaggy brown dingo opposite him faced him silently with a dark, resigned look in his light

brown eyes. It was as if the forest had disappeared around her and she had been forced to relive the fight that had changed her life.

Dingo had let out a low growl. "Even if I'm dead, you would go after them."

Bone had sneered. "Maybe I would and maybe I wouldn't. Didn't they say they have a new forest or something? The weird one? I don't go near that place..."

Saderia blinked and almost let out a gasp as the memory faded and the eerie forest flickered back into sight. Her heart pounding, she felt as if she had just surfaced from deep water. Pain burned in her chest at the memory of Dingo, but her whole body began to feel cold when she remembered the short conversation. What had Bone meant by 'the weird one?' Had he really been referring to the forest they were in now?

As far as she knew, her old home was the only other forest around the desert beside this one and she had never heard the dingoes call it 'the weird one,' so he had to have meant the new forest. But why? What would cause the toughest, meanest, cruelest dingo in the pack to avoid the forest? Was it the disasters...or something else? Maybe it was something only the dingoes knew from one of their 'stories.' She had guessed a long time ago that Dingo had known about the new forest but hadn't told them for some reason... Had he avoided telling them for the same reason Bone avoided going to it?

Frustration welled up inside her and she tried to stifle a hiss. There was clearly something there. Why couldn't she figure out what it was? Biting down on her lip to conceal a growl of annoyance, she glared down at her paws, then paused when she caught Dash staring at her. A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth.

"What?" she demanded, narrowing her eyes.

"I know that look." His eyes sparked in the sunlight. "You're thinking."

"Congratulations," she growled with a dry glare. "You guessed I was thinking."

He grinned. "You're figuring something out. Putting stuff together. Like before."

"I am not," she snapped, lashing her tail and turning away from him so he couldn't read her thoughts. When had he gotten the ability to read



minds?

He grinned and tried to hide a snicker. "You're back."

She let out an exasperated hiss and swatted him with a paw. "Shut up! I was just wondering about stuff. Jeez, I drift for a second and you all think I'm going to start spurring predictions on the future of the forest and the entire history of it and everything that's going to happen and the apocalypse!"

Dash's eyes glimmered in amusement. "Your attitude's coming back too."

She hissed in aggravation. "Is not!"

"Is too."

Letting out an exasperated growl, she pointedly turned away and continued to study the plants, yet she could still sense Dash grinning at her as they kept moving. A low growl rumbled in her chest, but she tried to hide it so as not to give him the satisfaction of annoying her. If he wanted to be an annoying idiot for the whole trip, then that was his business and who was she to interfere? She snorted and rolled her eyes, then felt another wave of annoyance crash over her when she realized that a grin was spreading over her face, too. Burning with annoyance and exasperation, she tried to frown but couldn't and tried desperately to hide it from Dash, knowing more annoying comments were certain to follow. Like a moron, she grinned the whole way to the Home of the Leopards.

"Saderia! Dash!" A familiar, light-hearted voice greeted them the instant they stepped into the small clearing of the Home of the Leopards. Looking around, Saderia felt a smile spread across her face when she saw a yellow blur racing over to them.

Loki skidded to a halt in front of them, greeting them with a bright, green-eyed smile. Surveying the clearing behind her, Saderia could see why she seemed so happy. New rock and wooden dens had been built up around the Home of the Leopards and all the debris from the flood had been swept away. The fallen trees had disappeared from the clearing and the bright woods around the clearing was blooming with new growth in the places where the flood had sliced through it. There were hardly any clues to hint at the devastation the leopards had faced anywhere around the neighborhood.

“Hi, Loki,” Saderia said with a grin. “Are you doing okay? We came to see how things were going...Obviously, they’re going well.”

“Way better than well—they’re going great!” Loki replied, flashing her familiar haughty/friendly smile. “What? Did you think we wouldn’t be able to manage?”

Saderia grinned while Dash said hello to Loki, then looked up when a familiar leopard caught her eye. Looking over Loki’s shoulder, Saderia spotted Lisa padding past several of the rocky houses, carrying a tiny leopard by its scruff.

“Hey, is that Tawny?” Dash asked, following her gaze with curious amber eyes.

The cub had grown much bigger and for the first time, they were able to see her wide, sparkling eyes—a chocolate brown color like her Aunt Maeta’s.

Loki looked back and grinned. “Yeah, that’s Tawny. She’s just learning to talk, and Lisa and I take turns looking after her while Maeta leads the leopards.”

“That’s cool,” Dash said, smiling at the wide-eyed cub. “Can we go see her?”

“Sure, come on.” Flicking her tail, Loki turned around and raced off toward her friend at a slower pace so that Saderia and Dash could keep up.

Lisa looked up at the sound of their paws thudding against the sparse grass and sat back to wait for them, her grayish blue eyes lighting up with happiness. Setting Tawny down, she gave them a shy smile when they raced to a stop in front of her near one of the rocky houses. “Hi, Saderia and Dash. What are you doing here?”

“We came to see you guys,” Dash said, giving Tawny a friendly wave.

Saderia nodded and smiled, then looked down at the cub. Sitting at their paws, Tawny looked around with wide eyes and began hobbling unsteadily toward Dash. After a short hesitation, she slowly extended a paw to bat at his dark brown tail. Dash looked down in surprise and smiled warmly, flicking his tail back and forth. The cub’s eyes lit up with delight as she lunged forward to try to catch it. “She’s so cute,” Dash said happily as Tawny pounced his tail to the ground and tried to chew it with her tiny teeth. He grinned and flicked it away from her, keeping up the game.

Saderia grinned and Loki and Lisa both giggled at the energetic kitten with sparkling brown eyes.

Saderia met Loki's shining eyes. "Has she said anything yet? You said she was learning how to talk."

Loki looked up and grinned. "Her first word was cheetah." She paused, her expression darkening with uncertainty. "And then Mommy... for Maeta."

Saderia looked down uncomfortably, feeling the same tingle of unease as Loki. Maeta was Tawny's aunt, not her mother, and she didn't know how Tawny would react when Maeta told her the truth...if she ever did tell her.

"She can sort of say our names," Lisa spoke up, her gray blue eyes gleaming.

"Yeah," Loki said, her worries fading away. "Tawny, say 'Loki.'"

"Lok-ee!" the cub squeaked, giving Loki a bright, admiring smile.

"Say 'Lisa,'" Lisa put in, a sparkle in her grayish blue eyes.

"Lee-sa!" Tawny chimed proudly, letting her tail curl up in delight.

"Tawny thinks its cute," Loki told them. "She's always proud of being able to say so many names." She paused, then grinned at the cub. "Tawny, can you say 'Saderia?'"

Tawny frowned and narrowed her eyes in thought, staying silent and thinking it over for a long moment. "S'De-ra!" she finally pronounced with a wide, excited grin.

Saderia and Lisa giggled. "Close enough," Saderia said with a grin.

"How about 'Dash?'" Lisa asked.

"Dash!" While the others smiled down at her, Tawny looked up at Dash with wide, shiny eyes. "Dash!" She giggled, then leapt back toward his tail to chase it again.

"She definitely seems to like you a lot," Loki said, watching her with gleaming green eyes and a tiny half-smile. "Daddy Dash."

"Yeah, she loves your tail," Saderia agreed, trying to smile and push away an irrational jealousy that the cub seemed to like Dash more. She couldn't exactly blame Tawny. Dash had always been friendly, sweet, and very easy to like.

The cub pinned Dash's tail to the ground with an excited squeak, then jumped away and looked up at Saderia with sparkling brown eyes.

“De-ra!” she exclaimed.

Saderia smiled and gave her a gentle pat on her fuzzy, spotted head. “Hi, Tawny.”

The cub grinned, then lunged toward her tail. Giggling, Saderia swished her tail quickly across the ground. Smiling down at the cub, the four of them formed a rough circle, leaving Tawny in the middle to bat at sprigs of grass and tails.

“So things are finally getting better, huh?” Loki grinned at Saderia and Dash. “I knew you and your parents could get this worked out.”

Saderia shrugged and tried to ignore a tingle of guilt since they weren’t really as confident as they let the others believe. “Yeah, things are going a little better now. We’re still trying to work some things out.”

“That’s good.” Loki shrugged and changed the subject with a friendly smile, relieving Saderia of her discomfort. As the day passed by and the sun moved gradually across the bright blue sky, they sat around the clearing, chatting about any number of things, like what had been happening around the Home of the Leopards lately, who had visited who, and other things that made the forest’s problems seem less threatening.

Eventually the sun began to sink toward the horizon, casting orange rays of light out across the forest. Saderia and Dash reluctantly said goodbye to Loki and Lisa and as they began padding back to their home, Saderia couldn’t help but wish she didn’t have to leave. She had felt much lighter and less burdened back at the Home of the Leopards. Now, with dark, sinister plants rising up around her and gnarled trees towering above her, she couldn’t help but wonder how long that happiness would last.

A world of darkness spread out in front of her. Saderia’s heart skipped and a wave of terror washed over her. Staggering to her paws, she ignored the stiff, pitch black grass prickling against her paws and looked around wildly at the dark, eerie forest surrounding her. Tall, curved trees rose up around her, reaching out toward her with dark, sharp branches and inky black leaves. Dusky bushes surrounded her as if trying to lock her in place. Not a single glimmer of moonlight shone down through the trees. The sky above her was pitch black with the darkness of night and covered by a thick layer of clouds.

Turning around in a circle, she searched desperately for a way out, but there was nothing around her but eerie plants and trees. A soft thump sounded in the distance. Whirling around, she saw the dense bushes surrounding the tiny clearing rustle then fall still. Her heart beat frantically in her chest and she looked around fearfully, backing in a continuous circle. Tiny pinpricks of yellow light twinkled through the wall of dense greenery, casting an eerie glow across the plants. She stared at the light shining through a clump of brush and felt her heart stop when a shadowed figure whisked past it.

Staggering backward, she whirled around at the sound of a soft rustle and saw two dark shadows dart out from behind a tree and disappear behind the next like a wisp of smoke against the shining yellow light. The leaves behind her quivered in the still night and she turned to see another shadow flutter past and disappear. Her heart beat frantically in her chest and she backed into the middle of the clearing. The soft thudding of paws against the ground whispered in her ears from every direction. The shining light glinted through the night and burned her eyes. Shadows whisked past her from every direction behind the thick wall of greenery, as if taunting her with being just out of sight.

She turned desperately back and forth. Dark figures flashed past her, just barely visible through the dark bushes. Shivers of fear crept up her spine, turning her body to ice. The thudding of paw steps echoed rapidly around the clearing until she could barely tell it apart from her heartbeat. Suddenly, almost as if on a cue, the sounds stopped.

Whirling around, she scanned the woods frantically, but the leaves were silent and still. Her fur prickled with the feeling of being watched by hundreds of eyes. Turning around, she searched desperately for any sign of the shadowed figures, then froze. A sharp snapping sound echoed through the forest. She started to scream, but before she could utter a word, every light disappeared, leaving her in nothing but pure darkness.

Saderia's eyes flew open and she jerked upward with a gasp. Her heart hammering wildly in her chest, she looked frantically back and forth for any sign of the shadowed creatures. The darkness of the room and the craggy walls leered back at her, but she could see no sign of anything hiding in the gloom. With a long, shaky sigh, she slowly turned to look out into the

den and paused when she saw a faint, yellow light flicker to life just outside of her room. Her mind whirled with memories of the eerie nightmare, but before she could panic, the face of a dark brown lion appeared around the corner of her room.

“Saderia?” Dash called, meeting her eyes with his worried gaze. “Are you okay?”

Saderia took a deep breath to calm the pounding of her heart and managed to nod.

“Yeah, I...I’m fine,” she murmured. “Just...just a nightmare.”

His eyes narrowed with concern. “A nightmare? You mean you had a Dream?”

“No,” she snapped quickly, narrowing her eyes. “I didn’t have a Dream. I’m fine.”

Disbelief gleamed in his narrowed amber eyes. “You’re shaking,” he murmured. “You think I don’t know what you look like after you’ve had a Dream?” He hesitated. “Why are you lying about your Dreams? Have you been hiding more of them?”

“No, because I haven’t had them,” she growled, narrowing her eyes.

He blinked and stared at her for a long time, his eyes narrowed with unease. “Fine,” he muttered. “You didn’t have a Dream. Just an ordinary one then?”

She looked down with a shiver as the nightmare flashed through her mind. “Y-yeah, just an ordinary dream. I don’t remember what it was about,” she added quickly, seeing him start to question her. “It was just... scary.”

His eyes dropped to his paws. “Oh.” He let out a soft, heavy sigh. “Well, all right. Are you going to be okay? Can you get back to sleep?”

“Yeah, I’ll be all right,” she muttered, trying to ignore her guilt.

Dash took a deep breath and took a hesitant step toward her, his eyes glowing with disappointment and regret. “Are you sure you don’t remember?”

Saderia heaved a long sigh, knowing he wouldn’t stop questioning her unless she gave some sort of answer. Not for the first time, she wondered why she couldn’t just tell Dash about giving up on her Dreams, but the answer popped into her mind instantly. She couldn’t risk having Dash be so disappointed in her. He just couldn’t understand.

“Saderia?” Dash pressed. “Can you remember anything about what it was about?”

Her eyes flashed with annoyance and her heart ached with guilt. Without thinking, she hissed the only thing she could think of to get him to back off. “It was about Dingo.”

Pain flashed in Dash’s eyes when she looked up to meet his gaze. Catching her eye, he looked down with a long, guilty sigh and just nodded. “Okay. Sorry.” He stared sadly down at his paws and started to back out of the room. “Goodnight.”

As he turned around and walked stiffly out of the room, she looked up to watch him. Her heart burned with guilt. Why did she have to keep hurting him?

Saderia tossed and turned violently in her bed, struggling to fall back asleep. Minutes ticked by like hours in the dark room. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t stop her mind from whisking back to the creepy Dream or the conversation she had had with Dash. Memories of his guilty expression and the disappointment shining in his eyes burned in her mind, making her wince with guilt. As the night dragged on, she could still hear her cold words. Pain burned in her chest until she finally sat up with a heavy sigh, knowing her guilty thoughts would never let her get any sleep. Blinking tiredness out of her eyes, she pushed back the scratchy blanket and leapt to the cold, freezing stone floor.

Shivering, she padded gingerly out of her room. Darkness hung over the den, shadowing the rooms of her family members and hiding them from sight. The only light shone in from outside. Looking out at the gaping entrance to the den, she paused just in front of the jagged hole. The enormous, silver moon shone brightly in the sky, casting the tiniest hint of light out over the forest. Outlined against the moon sat Dash, his dark brown fur bathed in the silvery glow of the moonlight.

After a long pause, Saderia hesitantly crept forward. A rush of frigid night air breezed over her as she padded out onto the cool, dark grass. Without making a sound, she carefully padded toward him and sat down beside him, her heart burning with grief. His tail swished through the grass and his gaze remained locked on the starry sky.

“I was wondering if you were going to come out here,” he murmured. Letting out a soft breath, he looked over at her with sad, glowing eyes, then turned his gaze back to the stars. “I take it you couldn’t sleep well.”

She looked down with a long sigh. “Dash, there’s something I need to tell you.”

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “About the fact that you think you’re the reason for what happened to him and that’s why you’re hiding your Dreams?”

Her eyes opened wide. Whipping around to face him, she stared at him with wide, stunned amber eyes. She wanted to say something, but no words came out.

He glanced back with a worried look. “I’m waiting for you to say it’s not true.”

She looked away and closed her eyes with shame.

Beside her, Dash heaved a long, heavy sigh. “I was afraid you wouldn’t.”

“You don’t know the whole story,” she muttered, staring miserably at her paws.

“Then tell me the whole story,” he replied, giving her a calm, worried glance out of the corner of his eye. “I understand why you’d lose faith in your Dreams and I don’t mind so long as you’re trying to bounce back, but an explanation would be nice.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes and gazed up at the stars, the only things that hadn’t changed. Her heart ached as she thought back to the past. “Back in the desert...when we were with...him... Back in his den, I had a Dream where I saw...Claw.”

Dash’s eyes widened in surprise. “His dead sister?”

“Yeah... She was a ghost and she came to me in a Dream to talk. She said that I was allowed to see ghosts because I was ‘special’...because of my Dream sense and powers. She said she would help me, like come visit me in Dreams to guide me through problems and things like that. She said she was glad that she could talk to someone that was close to her brother because she missed him. She said she was grateful that I helped him...” She paused uncertainly and glanced at him with uneasy amber eyes. “Do you remember back in the desert when we first got lost, I thought I



heard that strange voice out of nowhere? That was her. So...ever since... ever since he died...I was hoping Claw would visit me in a Dream. I...I thought that maybe he would be with her and they would tell me that they were all right together. But she never came and neither did he.”

Saderia took a deep breath, while Dash watched her with a dark expression. Her voice trembled when she forced herself to continue. “Claw’s probably mad at me. I can’t blame her either. I...I was supposed to *help* her brother, not...let him die...”

“Saderia...”

She squeezed her eyes shut with pain and lashed her tail. “Just listen!”

Dash blinked and fell silent, waiting for her to continue.

After taking another shaky breath, Saderia opened her eyes and murmured, “She’s probably disappointed and angry...that after she had put so much faith in me, I just...left him to die.” Dash let out a long sigh that she barely heard. Shaking her head miserably, she tried to blink back the sting of tears. “Maybe they’re together now and they just don’t feel like bothering with me. I don’t know why Dingo hasn’t at least tried to talk to me. I guess he’s mad, too, that I was selfish enough to just run away when he needed me the most...” She let her voice trail off into silence, feeling pain burn in her heart.

Dash stared at her for a long time, his eyes dull with understanding and grief. “So that’s where all this came from.” He watched her for a long moment before taking a deep breath. “I could tell you that you weren’t selfish, that Dingo’s dying wish would be for us to get out of there alive so that he could finally rest in peace knowing he had done *something* to help *someone*, like he thought Claw wanted, but you probably won’t listen.” Before she could say anything, he went on, “I didn’t know Claw and I definitely haven’t seen her in a Dream. But somehow I don’t believe that she came to visit you just to put weight on your shoulders to make her brother’s life completely perfect when that’s impossible. I think she was grateful for what you had already done, but she had to know that you couldn’t have done anything to prevent what happened. No one could. She had to have known that you’d already done enough to help Dingo.

“Why Dingo or Claw haven’t tried to talk to you in a Dream since then, I don’t know. But there could be lots of reasons and just because you

didn't see them like you thought, you shouldn't let it destroy your life. I didn't know Claw, but I knew Dingo, and he would never hate you for anything, much less something out of your control. You just have to go on with your life."

Saderia bit her lip and turned away, squeezing her eyes shut. Sorrow and guilt burned in her heart, making her wince with pain. Claw had promised her that she would visit. If she had already visited her once, why couldn't she do it again? Couldn't she see how much she needed her? No, she hadn't visited because Saderia had messed up and now she was being punished. Why couldn't Dash understand that? How could he expect her to just get over Dingo's death? Was she the only one that cared?

Dash blinked and carefully met her gaze. "I know how much it hurts. I went through the same things you did. But you can't just keep blaming yourself. You can't let this destroy your whole life, and I know you don't want to hear it, but it's about time you listened. Like it or not, what happened happened and you know as well as I do that if we hadn't run, we wouldn't have stood a chance. There's no way we would have been able to do anything with so many dingoes there and expect to live. Dingo wanted us to run. It was his last wish for us to live and he was happy just to have helped us. We were able to make things a bit brighter for him while he was alive and that's what matters. He knew what was going to happen and he wanted us to run because we *had* helped him."

Saderia opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her off with a dark, shadowed expression. "Saderia, let's face it: there was no future for Dingo in that desert and he knew it. He knew he would die eventually. And I know it hurts and I know this is cruel, but the truth is that Dingo might be better off dead."

She whipped around to stare at him in shock. Pain exploded in her chest and betrayal burned through her blood, making her freeze in horror and stare at him in disbelief. Before she knew what was happening, a loud growl rumbled fiercely in her throat and her eyes narrowly furiously at him.

He watched her with wide, sad amber eyes. "Saderia..."

"Shut up!" she snarled, feeling her fur bristling with anger. Every inch of her longed to claw him, but she couldn't. Tears pricked at her eyes and her claws dug furiously into the gritty dirt beneath her. She shook her head desperately back and forth, fighting back a wave of pain, and tore

herself off of the ground. Her eyes met Dash's, blurring with tears and burning with fury.

"You're just like your father!"

Dash opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say a word, she whipped around and darted away from him as fast as she could. Gaping at her in shock, he leapt to his paws. "Saderia, wait!" he shouted, but she ignored his desperate call.

Branches stabbed viciously at her face and sides as she dove behind a clump of dark, multicolor undergrowth and disappeared into the woods. Ignoring the sharp sting of pain, she darted forward, racing through the woods and dodging anything in her path. Gnarled trees rose up in front of her, creating a twisting labyrinth of eerie, towering trees, but she leapt past the snagging branches and barely noticed when they ripped out tufts of fur. Thorn-covered weeds reached up and clung to her legs, but she snapped them in half without noticing the blood she left behind. Shadows seemed to dance on the dusky forest floor as wind snaked past the trembling leaves. The moon had disappeared behind the pitch black canopy above, cloaking the entire woods in pure darkness. The only light that glimmered through the dark undergrowth shone from the bright yellow light bulbs glowing in dens that were out of sight.

Tears pricked at Saderia's eyes and her heart ached with grief. Dash's words echoed in her mind over and over again until she gritted her teeth to fight the tears trembling just above her cheek. She could see Dingo's kind face in her mind, but could only hear Dash's cold words. *Better off dead*. Fury and grief coursed through her shaking body, making her bite down hard on her cheek to keep from crying out. Her heart thumped with sorrow and the pain of betrayal.

Closing her eyes, she crashed through a wall of prickly bushes and stumbled into a tiny clearing. Her paws shook beneath her and she sank down on the ground with a silent sob. The grass prickled against her white belly and tiny droplets of blood slithered through her fur, but she barely noticed. Her body shook with sadness and she buried her face in her grass-stained, aching paws, trying to push away the memory of Dash's cruel words. Dingo was *not* better off dead. He would have been fine if he had gotten a chance to live. It wasn't right that that chance had been taken away. She tried not to think about Dash or Dingo, but no matter how hard she

tried, a dull ache still lingered in her chest as if someone had drove a claw into her heart and wouldn't stop twisting it.

Letting out a deep breath, she slowly looked up at the woods around her and tried to ignore her painful thoughts. The scene in front of her blurred with tears, but she rapidly blinked them away and tried not to think the same dark thoughts. Slowly, she pushed herself to her paws. The yellow light from the faraway dens spilling through the undergrowth twinkled and burned her eyes. Turning away from the luminous glow, she looked back in the direction she had come, then turned around to survey the woods. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw one of the bushes rustle in front of her.

Fear slithered down her spine. Unsheathing her claws, she crept closer to the bush, then froze when something caught her eye. Turning to the burning glare of one of the shimmering lights, she froze when she saw something dart past the glow and disappear behind a tree. Her heart began to beat faster and she whirled around to look in every direction. Every rustle sent a wave of cold fear through her body and a frigid rush of wind made even her blood feel cold. Her Dream flashed through her mind and her heart started to race at the thought of the eerie, shadowed figures. She looked around frantically before turning back to face the direction she had come from. She started to take a step into the woods, but a loud snap suddenly echoed through the forest.

She froze and whirled around. Somewhere in the distance, a spark flashed, the snap sounded, and all the faint glows of light from the faraway dens flickered out all at once. This time, for good.

# Chapter Seven

## Plan A

“Hey! Hey, everybody! Come check this out!”

Jeb’s eyes shot open and he jumped in alarm at the sound of the loud, excited voice. He landed roughly on his paws on the cold stone floor, his fur bristling in terror and his heart pounding rapidly. His eyes darted wildly around the tiny, shadowed cave, his sight still blurry with sleepiness. A few feet away from them, Telku nervously raised his head and blinked the tiredness out of his green eyes, while Jati jumped to her paws with wide blue and gray eyes. She let out a low growl of annoyance when she whipped around to look around the cave den and realized they were alone.

Lashing her tail, she stalked toward the entrance to the cave den and peered out into the Spring. Behind her, Telku pushed himself to his paws and frowned in confusion.

“Relax, Jeben,” Jati muttered, glancing back into the cave den and noticing the wide eyes and bristling fur of her son. “It’s just one of those freaks.”

A shiver of terror raced up Jeb’s spine and thoughts of creatures bursting into the Spring with bared, bloody fangs and claws whirled through his mind. “Which freaks?”

Telku took a step forward to stand beside Jati and heaved a sigh of relief. “It’s just one of the outlaws. Not one of the strange creatures.”

Jeb heaved a long sigh of relief, feeling his fur start to lie flat. Trying not to tremble, he crept toward the entrance of the den and had to squint to see through the darkness and peer out into the Spring. Who in their right mind went around shouting in the middle of the night when it could wake the creatures above them?

Citcha stood on the stone floor across the dry spring basin, her wild pale blue eyes gleaming in excitement and her tail lashing eagerly back and forth. Dozens of outlaws crept cautiously out of their dens lining the back

of the Spring. Their eyes gleamed with fear and uncertainty, while others narrowed their eyes in annoyance and fury.

“What now?” Jeb looked up to see Secka stalk out through the jagged entrance of his den at the back of the cavern and mutter under his breath, his fur ruffled and his eyes narrowed in annoyance. “Can’t a guy get any sleep around here anymore?”

“Yeah, Citcha, what’s wrong with you?” another outlaw shouted, lashing their tail. “Don’t you know you could wake the creatures?”

“Who cares?” Citcha’s eyes gleamed. “Come see what I just found!”

An outlaw gaped in disbelief. “It’s nighttime! How dare you wake us up?”

Citcha lashed her tail in annoyance. “Would you just come on? I think it’s important! It’s one of the creatures’ things!”

The outlaws’ ears pricked up in surprise and sudden interest, and the annoyance and irritation in their eyes suddenly faded into wonder and fear. The muttering that had spread around the main part of the Spring died away and the kraguers fell silent. All of them paused and looked up at Citcha with curiosity written in their expressions.

“Why didn’t you say so?” a red outlaw demanded. “What is it?”

A brown criminal let out a low, dangerous growl from the back of the Spring. “I don’t like being disturbed, so you better make this quick if you enjoy living.”

Citcha narrowed her eyes. “It’s something the creatures put out all around the forest. It’s...I can’t really explain it. You just have to see for yourself.”

“Forget this.” One of the outlaws rolled his eyes and snorted in disdain. “This is a waste of time. I’m going back to sleep.”

A few other outlaws let out annoyed growls and turned to stalk back to their cave dens, lashing their tails in irritation. Many of the outlaws stayed, watching the others leave with narrowed eyes. Most of them had a bored look on their face, as if they merely needed something to do, but a glimmer of wonder lit up the eyes of many of the kraguers. Glancing up at his parents, Jeb saw a sparkle of curiosity lighting up Telku’s green eyes, while Jati’s blue and gray eyes were dull with annoyance. Mixed amounts of wonder and fear burned in his own blue and green eyes. What did this ‘creature thing’ do?

Citcha glanced around at the remaining kraguers and flicked her tail. “So are the rest of you coming up to see it or are you too chicken like those other guys?”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t make such a production out of it,” Secka muttered, rolling his eyes and pushing himself to his paws. Flicking his tail, he padded slowly across the stony floor before leaping over the basin to stand beside Citcha under the silvery glow of moonlight. “Let’s just go look at the stupid thing so we can get back to sleep.”

A few of the outlaws muttered in agreement and rose to their paws. Jeb watched them nervously as they slunk down into the basin and climbed back up to stand on the tiny stretch of stone on the opposite side.

Telku flicked Jeb and Jati with his tail. “We should go, too.”

“I guess we might as well,” Jati muttered. “This is probably a waste of time.”

Telku merely shrugged. “We’ll see.” Casting a quick glance around the Spring, he stepped forward and padded toward the basin.

Jeb hesitated in uncertainty, then forced himself to stagger after them, hoping that it would be worth going up into the surface world to see it.

A tiny clearing spread out in front of the outlaws when Citcha finally led them to their destination. Laying in a shallow, narrow trench of churned up dirt was a small, thin, narrow line that looked almost like a black vine. The other ends of the long, vine-like object disappeared into the earth on either side of the hole that had been dug up around it. The strange object seemed to be made up of a bunch of tiny lines of different colors all stuck together.

Citcha stood over the strange, foreign object with a wide, cocky smirk and stared out at the others. The outlaws gazed down at the odd item with wide, confused eyes and stunned expressions. Jeb blinked several times and gazed at the object in misunderstanding and befuddlement. The moonlight shining down from above cast a silvery glow across the object, lighting it up for them to see. The outlaws stared at the strange object for what felt like ages until someone finally blurted out the question on everyone’s mind: “What is it?”

Citcha shrugged. “How should I know?”

An outlaw narrowed his eyes. "Well, you found it!"

"That doesn't mean I know what it is!" She lashed her tail. "All I know is that... there! See those yellow lights glowing from those rocky dens?"

The outlaws followed her gaze and shivered when they spotted a few of the dens the creatures had made sitting a few feet away, hidden behind the thick trees. Yellow light spilled out from the dens the same way it had for days. The criminals tried to hide a tinge of fear and turned back to Citcha when she cleared her throat to get their attention.

"We've already figured out that that's where those creatures live—in those weird above-ground dens," the thief continued, cutting her eyes at the den. "You all see that strange yellow light coming from them?"

One of the outlaws narrowed their eyes uneasily. "It's been that way for a few days. We don't know what it is or where it came from."

"Exactly," Citcha replied, a wide grin spreading across her face. "A couple of days ago, I spied on the creatures to see if they had anything good to take and I saw them dig a few trenches in the dirt like this one and..."

"Are you mad?" One of the criminals gaped at her in disbelief. "You spied on the creatures just to see if they had anything good to steal? You could have gotten killed!"

"Worse, you could have exposed us to them!" another burst out, glaring at her and lashing his tail. "You could have gotten us *all* killed!"

Citcha glared at them and let out a hiss. "Hey, shut up! I didn't get anyone killed! I've never been caught stealing before, so why now?"

One kraguer snorted. "What about when Zerone found out and exiled you?"

"Everyone hush," Secka muttered before Citcha could snarl back at them. His dark, half-lidded gray eyes flicked around at the others and his tail twitched impatiently. "No one's dead and Citcha always has been a little...off, so let it be."

"*Thank you*," Citcha muttered, rolling her eyes in exasperation. "Anyway, as I was saying, I saw them dig these trenches a few days ago, but I didn't get to see why. Maybe the creatures were putting this thing in the ground back then." She glanced down at it and frowned, inspecting it closely. "It looks kind of like a black vine actually."

"It's too thin to be a vine," a red criminal called.



She lashed her tail and curled her lip. "I'm aware of that, but what else are we supposed to call it? Long weird thing in the ground?"

The red kraguer rolled his eyes and shook his head. Another outlaw cautiously took a step toward the strange black vine-like object. After a long moment of hesitation, he slowly leaned forward and pressed a paw up against the side of it. Almost instantly he jerked back with a sharp yelp of pain and waved his paw frantically through the cold night air. "It's hot!" he exclaimed. "It burnt my paw!"

Citcha snickered. "Yeah, I know. It burnt mine, too."

The outlaw stopped waving his paw and looked at her with eyes wide with disbelief. "And you didn't tell me and stop me?"

She shrugged and grinned. "I thought it would be funny if I left that part out."

He gaped at her in disbelief, but before he could reply, another outlaw spoke up.

One of the outlaws narrowed his eyes at Citcha. "All right, so you found this thing. Big deal. Now can someone tell me what this thing is and why it's important?"

Citcha opened her mouth to snap back at him, but a reddish orange kraguer looked up with wide eyes before she could speak.

"Wait a minute," he exclaimed. "If that black vine is hot...isn't light hot?"

A brown kraguer narrowed his eyes and frowned. "What? What do you mean?"

"Well..." The reddish outlaw hesitated and narrowed his eyes in thought. "Like...the sun. That's light, right? And the sun's hot, right?" A small murmur of agreement rose up from the criminals. Standing close to the vine, Secka rolled his eyes. "Well, if that black vine is hot and there's light in those creature dens," the red kraguer continued, "couldn't that mean that the vine thing *here* is making the light in *there*?"

The outlaws frowned and exchanged wondering glances through narrowed eyes. The sound of muttering rose up in the air as the kraguers glanced curiously at their neighbors. Jeb blinked several times, feeling almost dizzy with confusion.

Citcha frowned and narrowed her eyes in thought. "Maybe you're right."

“But what exactly does that mean?” someone demanded.

Jeb’s eyes lit up with a sudden idea. “It could mean...” Trailing off, he looked up, then froze in alarm when he realized every eye was burning into his fur.

“Well, Jeb, spit it out,” Secka growled, glancing over at him with bored gray eyes. “We don’t have all night. What’s it mean?”

Jeb gulped nervously and gazed around at all the outlaws with wide, terrified blue and green eyes. Turning to face the ground, he took a deep, shaky breath and tried to stop the pounding of his heart. “W-well...light helps, doesn’t it? I mean, it...gives heat and helps you see things...so it’s probably something the creatures want. And if they went through all the trouble of digging in the dirt and setting this up so that it lights up the houses...it could mean that they’re settling in to stay here...forever.”

Gasps of shock rose up around the outlaws. Jeb looked up slowly to see them turning away from him, their eyes wide with horror. Fervent whispering spread throughout the tiny clearing, and fear and alarm seemed evident in every hushed voice.

“There’s got to be something we can do,” someone hissed, looking around with wild eyes. “Somehow we have to stop the creatures from moving in permanently.”

The whispering of the outlaws grew louder and panic tinged the tense air. The outlaws looked wildly around at each other and shivered in fear when their eyes darted toward the houses hiding the creatures several feet away. Terror and alarm gleamed in their eyes when they spotted the yellow glow lighting up the dens and piercing through the woods. Their frightened voices rose higher and higher until they were almost shouting.

Jati lashed her tail and glared around at them. “All of you shut up!” When they slowly fell silent and glared at her out of the corners of their eyes, she took a step forward and narrowed her eyes at the black vine. “Suppose we cut this thing,” she murmured.

One of the outlaws blinked at her in shock. “Cut it? What do you mean? How?”

“Gee, I don’t know. Maybe with our claws?” She rolled her eyes and shook her head before staring intently down at the black vine. “If this thing is carrying the light to those den things, then maybe if we cut it in half, the light won’t be able to get there.”

The kraguers exchanged thoughtful glances, and a few murmurs of wonder and curiosity spread around the clearing.

Citcha frowned and stepped closer to the vine to inspect it. Her eyes narrowed in uncertainty. “What if the light jumps out of the cut we make? What if it’s dangerous or hot? What if it lights up this whole forest and shows everyone where we are?”

One of the outlaws gasped in horror. “What if the light stays there permanently after we cut it? What if it’s never night?”

Another gaped in shock and dismay. “Then we’ll *never* be able to come to the surface again! We’ll never have the cover of night again!”

Jeb’s eyes widened in horror at the outlaw’s words. Terrified muttering instantly spread around the clearing like wildfire, making all of the kraguers’ eyes light up in alarm. Images of bright light pouring out of a cut in the vine whirled through Jeb’s mind, making his heart beat faster with fear. Shaking, he let out a whimper of terror, but before he could cry out, an annoyed growl rose over the murmuring of the kraguers.

Secka glared around at all of the outlaws as they quieted down to look at him. He curled his lip and looked around in disgust. “I can’t believe you losers actually think some stupid light is going to jump out of this thing and kill us.” His cold, condescending voice silenced the last few whispers circulating around the clearing. The gray outlaw let out a long sigh. “Do you realize how moronic you all sound? To be afraid of *light*?”

One of the outlaws bristled and flattened their ears. “It’s the creature’s light.”

“The creatures don’t *own* the light,” Secka retorted. Glancing down at the black vine, he took a deep, irritated breath. “Look, whatever this thing is, it isn’t magic and neither are the creatures, so why are we so afraid of the light? I don’t think it will light up our hiding spot and expose us—somehow I doubt it works that way.”

“Oh yeah? Well, how do you know, Secka?” Citcha narrowed her eyes. “How else would those dens be lit up unless this thing carried the light? And why wouldn’t the light jump out of place if it could? And how do you know the creatures aren’t magic? I mean, look at them! I don’t think any natural force could have created such horrible creatures.”

Secka shook his head in annoyance. “You’re all talking nonsense. Maybe I don’t *know* how those creatures were made, but they *could* be

something natural for all we know.” He put a paw to his forehead. “A day when we have to fear *light* is a sad day.”

“You don’t know anything,” Citcha hissed, lashing her tail. “Or maybe...” Her eyes widened in sudden shock and she gasped at him. “Maybe you’re working against us with the creatures!” The other outlaws let out gasps of shock and whipped around to stare at him with wide, stunned eyes while Citcha let out a growl. “Did you meet up with the creatures, Secka? Did they offer not to eat you if you would bring us to them for dinner?”

Secka rolled his eyes. “Yeah, that’s it. I teamed up with the creatures.” He shook his head in disbelief and gazed around at them with raised eyebrows. “Are you guys *hearing* yourselves? If I had run into one of those things, I would be dead.”

A reddish outlaw nodded slowly, his eyes narrowed in thought. “He’s right,” he murmured, looking around at all the others. “Secka’s not stupid enough to team up with those things.” He bared his fangs and whirled around to glare at Citcha. “But *you* might!”

Citcha’s eyes widened in shock. “*What?*”

The kraguers around her gasped and stared at her in shock and incredulity.

“He’s right!” one of them exclaimed, gaping at the thief in amazement and narrowing his eyes in betrayal. “It makes sense. *You’re* the one who found this thing, Citcha, and you seem to know so much about it. The creatures must have caught you spying on them, and that’s when you made a deal with them!”

Citcha blinked and gaped in dismay, taking a step back. “Now wait a minute...”

One of the outlaws let out a furious snarl and lunged toward Citcha. “Traitor!”

Citcha’s eyes widened and she instantly ducked to avoid being hit, letting the outlaw sail over her head. She looked around wildly, her tail twitching with alarm as other harsh cries sounded around the clearing. Baring their fangs and jumping to their paws, the outlaws stalked toward her, letting out growls and snarls. Their eyes gleamed with fury and anger as they advanced on her, trapping her in the middle.

Secka stood off to the side, watching with raised eyebrows, while Jeb and his family sat frozen to the spot in shock. The gray outlaw curled his lip. "You're all being ridiculous," he snapped. "No one is teaming up with the creatures."

The outlaws didn't seem to hear him. They bared their fangs in fury and stalked toward Citcha until they had completely surrounded her, trapping her in the center of the clearing. Citcha unsheathed her claws and snarled at them, her eyes glinting with anger and bloodlust. A tiny flicker of fear gleamed in her pale blue gaze.

Telku stared at them in shock. Leaping forward, he shoved his way through the crowd of outlaws as quickly as he could until he had reached Citcha. Ignoring her distrustful hiss, he instantly moved forward to stand in front of her and glared around at the other criminals. "All right, everybody calm down!" he shouted. "We can't have everybody turning on everybody else. Secka's right, and no one in their right mind would team up with those creatures. We're all in this together. Leave Citcha alone."

The outlaws narrowed their eyes and glared at him, letting out dangerous growls and muttering darkly to one another. Giving Telku cold, mutinous gazes, the outlaws took another step forward, ignoring his words and baring their fangs. Jeb felt his whole body go cold with horror. Were they going to attack his father?

A cry of fear tore out of his chest when they took another step toward him, but before he could do anything, Secka let out a heavy sigh and stormed forward, shouldering his way roughly through the crowd. Stepping up to Telku and raising an eyebrow, he calmly flicked his tail. "You know, if you keep carrying on this way, fighting and making all this noise, we won't need the light to show the creatures where we are."

The outlaws froze and a deathly silence instantly fell over the clearing. All of the criminals stared up at him with wide, terrified eyes and exchanged wordless, horrified glances. After a long hesitation, they shakily started to back away, casting nervous glances over both shoulders. They kept their mouths squeezed shut and didn't dare say a word or try to attack as they sat back and huddled down close to the ground.

Secka simply shook his head and stalked away from Citcha and Telku, muttering under his breath. "Feels good to use your brain once in a while, huh, guys?"

Telku heaved a sigh of relief and carefully stepped away from Citcha to stand beside his family. Citcha sat uncomfortably back in her spot in front of the black vine, her fur bristling and her claws still digging into the ground.

Jeb sighed in relief and gratitude and pressed close against his father when he returned, but Jati just lashed her tail and hissed. “Let’s just cut this thing and see what happens. Whatever *does* happen happens.” Before anyone could stop her, she lunged toward the black vine and slammed her claws on it. Her blue and gray eyes glinted when the black vine didn’t instantly break apart and she sawed at it with her claws as hard as she could.

One of the kraguers gaped in disbelief and lunged toward her. “Are you mad?” He tried to pull her away, but Jati let out a hiss and shoved him away, sending him staggering back to his place. Whipping back around, she clawed at the black vine.

Secka narrowed his eyes. “She’s right. Let’s get this over with.” Leaning down, he dug his claws into the vine-like object, flicking his tail calmly back and forth.

Jeb watched them with narrowed, uncertain blue and green irises. Fear glimmered in his eyes with every cut they made. His heart stopped when the vine split apart, but when the vine was finally cut in half, the darkness around him wasn’t split apart by a bolt of light. Only a small snapping sound and a tiny, fleeting spark came from the destroyed vine. Somewhere in the distance, the yellow glow of one of the dens flickered out.

Jeb blinked several times and looked over at the den in shock before turning to gaze down at the cut black vine with wide eyes. A shaky sigh of relief shuddered out of his chest when he realized Secka had been right and the light hadn’t leapt out from the vine. The other outlaws let out heavy sighs of relief, as well, releasing the breath they had been holding. Their shoulders seemed to sag as the fear left their eyes.

Citcha stared down at the severed black vine with wide, stunned pale blue eyes. Looking up, she blinked around at the others, then suddenly whipped around to stare at the vine, her eyes lighting up with a sudden idea. “Hey, if cutting this thing put out one of those lights, then maybe there’s

more of these things we can dig up. If we can find more of them all around the forest and cut them like this, maybe it will cut out all the lights!”

Jati grinned. “Good thinking, Citcha. Once all their precious light is gone, the creatures will be less comfortable and less likely to stay here permanently!”

The outlaws blinked in surprise then let cold, sinister grins spread across their faces. Excited whispering spread around the clearing.

A sneer spread across Jati’s face as she looked back to face the others. “Everyone, I think we’ve found our solution. If we keep finding things like this and destroying them, then the creatures will eventually hate this place and be forced to leave.”

Secka glanced back and forth between Jati and Citcha, a hint of interest gleaming in his normally bored gray eyes. “It could work. We could show these freaks they can’t just come and destroy our forest and our lives.”

Citcha snickered, her pale blue eyes lighting up in anticipation. “I think I know how we can stop the light and destroy something of theirs. There’s got to be one main black vine that connects together all of the ones that run all over the forest. If we can find that main one, we’ll be able to put out all the lights in the forest with just one cut.”

Secka nodded slowly. “Good idea. It would take too long to cut all of the ones scattered throughout the forest and we’ve got limited time until the sun comes up.”

One of the outlaws frowned. “But how will we find that one main black vine?”

Citcha flicked her tail calmly, her eyes glimmering in excitement. “Simple. Picture all of those dens filled with creatures sitting in one of those wide clearings. There are a ton of those clearings scattered around the forest and each one of them has a bunch of dens with dozens of strange creatures living in them. Suppose for each clearing, there’s one black vine—let’s call it a light-holder—that lights up every den. I think that each one of those small light-holders connects to one main one that controls the light for the entire clearing. All of the main light-holders that control light for each individual clearing must connect to a larger main light-holder somewhere else that controls the light for the entire forest. If we go to each different clearing and find the main light-carrier for that particular clearing, we can dig them up just enough to see which way they go and follow them

until they lead us to the main one that lights up the whole forest. If we split up and each go to one clearing to follow the direction of the light-holder, we'll all eventually wind up in the same place. If we cut the main one only, all of the lights will go out. It will even look less suspicious. The creatures will think it was just an accident it got severed."

Jati's eyes lit up in excitement. "Citcha, you're a genius!"

"That's a first," Secka muttered, raising an eyebrow. "Looks like you finally came in handy, Citcha." He stepped forward to stand beside Jati and the thief and glanced around at all of the outlaws. "All right, so it's agreed. We'll all split up to go to a different clearing, track down the light-holder that powers that clearing, and follow it to the main light-holder that lights up the forest. I'll go to the one closest to here with Citcha and Jati. You three check out the clearing with the orange and black-striped creatures." He gestured toward three of the outlaws, who nodded eagerly. Scanning the clearing, Secka let his eyes fall on Jeb. "Telku and Jeb, you will go to the clearing with the sleek, spotted creatures closest to Zerone's Court to search for the light-holder. Got it?"

Jeb blinked and nodded, though he felt a tiny shiver of fear at traveling through the forest. Standing beside him, Telku nodded, his green eyes gleaming in determination.

"Good." Secka turned around to face the other outlaws and divided them up into similar groups of two or three, commanding them to investigate different clearings. All of the criminals instantly agreed and smiled eager, sinister smiles. Their eyes gleamed with determination in the shadows of the night, and for the first time Jeb felt a faint glimmer of hope. Maybe now that they had a plan, the forest would once again be theirs.

Bright moonlight shimmered down from the black sky, casting a silver glow on the purple and blue leaves of the trees. Eerie shadows flicked around the tall grass, making a few of the thick stalks seem almost white in the moonlight compared to the darkness covering the rest of the land. Thick clumps of undergrowth seemed to cover the base of every tree, reaching out toward them with sharp, prickly leaves.

Shivers crept up Jeb's spine with every step he took in the cold forest. His eyes darted wildly back and forth, scanning the shadows for any sign of hidden creatures. Struggling to shake off the fear, he stumbled



forward into a clump of undergrowth beside his father and peered through the leaves. His breath caught in his throat when he caught sight of a large clearing several feet away, past a few feet of tall, towering trees and thick bushes. Yellow light gleamed from within the creature dens, casting a faint light around the clearing hidden behind the trees. A glimmer of hope burned in Jeb's chest when he realized his task was close to being halfway over, but the hope disappeared in an instant when a tiny rustling sound met his ears.

Looking down sharply, he froze and felt his heart stop when a clump of bushes just a few feet in front of him started to rustle. Telku froze beside him and whipped around to stare at the bush with wide green eyes. Jeb stared at the quivering bush in terror, feeling his blood run cold. A sharp shriek of terror tore out of his throat when a paw stepped out of the bush, but Telku slapped a paw over his mouth to keep him quiet. Before they could run away, an animal stepped cautiously out of the bushes and looked around wildly. The instant the animal's gray and green eyes landed on Telku and Jeb, he let out a gasp of shock and jumped back in terror, his fur fluffing up in alarm. Shaking violently, Telku let his paw drop to the ground while Jeb gaped in shock. It wasn't a strange creature that stood shaking in front of them. It was the Emperor of the forest.

Zerone stared back at them with wide eyes. Taking a deep breath, he tried to relax, but he never blinked or took his eyes off of them. Letting out a sigh of relief and feeling his legs tremble with weakness, Jeb struggled to breathe and make his heart start beating again when he realized the danger had been a false alarm, but the cold sense of terror lingered in his chest even when he tried to tell himself that he was safe.

The three kraguers stared at each other in silence with wide, stunned eyes for what felt like ages before Telku finally took a deep breath and let it out. Narrowing his eyes in unease, he faced Zerone with a guarded expression. "What are *you* doing out here?"

Zerone hesitated for a long time, then narrowed his eyes and glared at them. "I could ask you two the same thing."

Telku lashed his tail. "Give it a rest, Zerone. We're not outlaws and you know it."

"Says you," the Emperor snapped. "What are you doing out here?"

Telku hesitated and looked around with a nervous look before letting out a soft sigh. "We're doing a service for the forest. We're trying to drive

out those creatures.”

“Well, congratulations,” Zerone muttered, narrowing his eyes. “So am I.”

Telku frowned and cautiously sat back. “What are you doing to drive them out?”

Zerone hesitated for a long moment and glanced suspiciously over both shoulders before leaning closer and lowering his voice. “I found this weird vine-looking thing and when one of my guards cut it, the yellow light in one of the creature’s dens went out.”

“Congratulations to you,” Telku muttered with a dry tone. “We’re way ahead of you and we’ve already come up with a plan for those light-holders.”

The Emperor narrowed his eyes. “Oh yeah? Like what?”

Telku hesitated and eyed Zerone with guarded green eyes, not wanting to reveal the outlaws’ plan to his enemy. After a long moment of consideration, he finally let out a soft sigh. “I suppose it won’t do any good to keep secrets from each other if we’re all trying to drive out these creatures.” He paused for a short moment, then quickly explained Citcha’s plan to the Emperor.

Zerone narrowed his eyes and looked down at his paws for a long moment until he finally gave him a grudging nod. “I suppose it is a...*decent* plan.”

Telku just shrugged and glanced around at the land behind Zerone. “So where are your guards and the whole procession you usually drag around with you?”

“I’m alone.” Zerone gave him a challenging glare. “I left my guards behind so I could check this out without them doing something stupid to make the creatures find us.”

Telku nodded slowly. “Seems smart.”

“I also sent some of the guards to some of the dens where the creatures live to take some of their stuff. I’m hoping it might make them turn against each other, which might help drive them out.” He flicked his tail resolutely and stepped toward them with a commanding glare. “And now I’m coming with you two to find this main light-holder.”

Telku blinked several times and stared at him in shock. “*What?*”

“You heard me, Telku.” The Emperor narrowed his eyes in a warning glare. “This is *my* forest, and I should have a part in driving out those freaks.”

Telku gritted his teeth. “It was *our* plan, not yours.”

Zerone lashed his tail. “*I’m* the Emperor.”

Telku opened his mouth to snap back at him, then paused and finally let out a long, aggravated sigh. “Fine,” he muttered, “you can come.” He paused, then looked up and met his eyes with a challenging stare. “But only if you agree to one thing.”

He bristled in indignation. “I don’t have to agree to anything! I’m the Emperor.”

Telku rolled his eyes. “This crisis affects all of us regardless of whether you rule the forest or live as an outlaw in the Spring. Your status doesn’t mean anything, not now. We *all* have to work together to protect our home from those creatures. Once they’re gone, we can go back to hating each other and things can go back to the way they were, but until then, we all have to join together to fight this.” He hesitated, then took a deep breath and met Zerone’s gaze. “I want us all to plan together—you and the kraguers from your Court and the outlaws from the Spring.”

Zerone gaped at him in disgust. “Plan with *outlaws*? Are you crazy?” He glared and gritted his teeth. “All of you are just using this as a way to get back into my Court!”

“No, this is my plan, not theirs.” Telku narrowed his eyes and forced himself to meet Zerone’s flaming, accusatory green and gray eyes. “We’ll stay in our Spring, and you’ll stay in your Court. All I’m asking is that, for the sake of our forest, we collaborate together just this once so we can know what the other is doing and get a better idea for how to drive out those creatures. There’s no possible way even *you* can argue with being more informed about the forest and having bigger numbers to carry out plans, Zerone.”

The Emperor stayed silent for a long time, his eyes narrowed in thought. After what felt like ages, he slowly looked up to meet Telku’s gaze with guarded eyes. “All right, Telku, for just this one occasion, we’ll work together. But I think the criminals will be just as excited about working with me as I am about working with them.” Suppressing a shudder of disgust, he

heaved a sigh. "I suppose I can't argue. How about I meet you at the Sight Pond once a week to share news and plans?"

Telku managed a weak smile. "It's a deal. Now come on, let's find that light-holder." Without waiting for a response, he pushed past the Emperor and slipped into the clump of bushes he had appeared from. After a long moment of hesitation, Jeb and Zerone slowly followed him into the undergrowth.

Jeb's heart beat frantically as he padded past the bushes beside his enemy. After several moments of walking, the three of them froze when they peeked out through a clump of undergrowth and saw the clearing spreading out in front of them. Dark, rocky dens covered the clearing and dotted the edges of the woods. Yellow light shimmered from inside some of the stony dens, casting an eerie, luminous pattern over the shadowed grass. Trees rose up all around the clearing on the edge of the woods, closing it in.

Taking a deep breath, Telku glanced over at Jeb and Zerone. "You two wait here. I'll go find the light-holder and gesture for you to follow me once I figure out which direction we need to go."

Nodding silently, Jeb shrank down to the ground and tried to control the violent shaking of his legs. After a moment of hesitation, Telku silently slunk out toward the edge of the creature's clearing. When he reached the edge of the clearing, he started pawing at the dirt to dig a tiny trench like the one the other black vine had been in. After digging at the dirt in several different spots for a few moments that seemed like hours, Telku finally froze and stared intently down at a trench he had dug, his green eyes lighting up. Brushing dirt and grass back over the holes he had dug up so as not to cause suspicion, Telku instantly looked up and gestured for Jeb and Zerone to follow him.

Taking a deep, shaky breath, Jeb forced himself to stagger forward. A wave of fear crashed over him the instant he crept out on the open edge of the creature's clearing, making him shiver in terror. Staying close to the ground, he slunk past the rocky houses and darted forward to stand behind a thick bush hiding them from view. Zerone followed close behind him without a sound. Telku flicked his brown-tufted tail in the direction they were meant to go and whirled around to creep forward as quietly as possible.

Staying close to the bushes lining the clearing, they crept back into the woods, letting Telku walk in front of them to lead them in the right direction. Silence fell over them as they padded through the undergrowth, weaving around trees and sticking close to a long line of bushes. Shadows seemed to haunt every corner of the dark forest and the cold air around them sent shivers racing up Jeb's spine. He tried not to whimper at the fear rising in his chest or the feeling of being spied on by creatures and forced himself to keep moving. Minutes slowly ticked by into hours without any of them saying a word.

After several long moments of padding along in silence, Jeb's fur began to prickle with the uncomfortable sensation of being watched. Eyes bored into the side of his face, but when he glanced uneasily to the side, he realized it wasn't a creature watching him. Zerone padded silently beside him, studying him intently through narrowed gray and green eyes. Biting back a hiss, Jeb tried not to bring attention to it, but after a long moment, it became clear that Zerone wasn't going to stop scrutinizing him anytime soon. Gritting his teeth, he whirled around to face him and let out a quiet hiss. "Don't you have anything better to do besides watch me? Like watch out for creatures, maybe?"

Zerone apparently couldn't take a hint. The Emperor blinked several times, but didn't take his eyes off Jeb's face, not seeming to notice his words.

Lashing his tail in annoyance, Jeb glared at him out of the corner of his eye. His irritation started to fade away into wonder when he suddenly noticed the dark bags under the Emperor's eyes. His normally bright and well-cared-for yellow and black-striped fur seemed dull and unkempt and his uncombed, brown-tufted tail dragged listlessly against the ground. The translucent green webbing in between his paws looked battered and scratched and dirt clung to his paws and his fur. Jeb blinked in surprise and frowned in confusion. Since when did the Emperor of shallowness let himself look this bad?

Jeb watched Zerone stare at him out of the corner of his eye for a long moment before facing him with an uneasy expression. "Zerone... what's wrong with you?"

The Emperor blinked, then recoiled with a hostile, defensive look. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Jeb looked up at him with wide, confused eyes and shrugged uncomfortably. “You look...bad. What happened to you? Haven’t you been sleeping?”

Zerone flicked his tail sharply and glared at him. “I’m supposed to be sleeping when those creatures are roaming around outside?”

A chill ran down Jeb’s spine, and he cast a quick, anxious glance over his shoulder before slowly turning around to face Zerone. “Well, I suppose, but I’ve been sleeping fine. We’re safe in the underground.”

Zerone looked away and let out a low growl. “For now.”

Trying to suppress a fearful shiver, Jeb narrowed his eyes and tried to keep his tone firm. “The creatures haven’t found us even though they’ve been here for almost two months. Why do you look so bad when they haven’t done anything to us yet?”

“I don’t have to tell you my troubles,” Zerone snapped, his eyes flashing with fury. “*You* aren’t Emperor, so you couldn’t possibly understand.” After giving Jeb a scorching glare, he gritted his teeth and turned away from him, his eyes taking on a dull, haunted look. Staring absently out at the woods around him, he barely seemed to notice his surroundings at all. His mind seemed to drift off to another dark, miserable place.

Jeb blinked in surprise and stared at him for a long time, his mind whirling with confusion. A shiver of unease shot down his spine when he remembered seeing the same absent, haunted look clouding the Emperor’s eyes the day he and Secka had gone to his Court. He remembered the desperate tone in Zerone’s voice when he had asked him about the fire and the scared look that had gleamed in his eyes when Jeb had answered. A jolt of shock ran through him when he suddenly realized why Zerone looked so troubled.

He gaped at the Emperor in shock. “You’ve been thinking about the *fire*?”

Zerone blinked in surprise and whipped around to glare at him with burning gray and green eyes. “I don’t have to tell you anything about the fire!”

Jeb’s eyes widened in disbelief. “You’re losing sleep over something you did in the past when we have a bigger crisis right now? What kind of Emperor are you?”

“One who’s trying to look after his daughter,” Zerone snarled, gritting his teeth in fury and glaring down at him with blazing eyes. “Not that you would ever care or understand.” He turned away from him and lashed his tail. “I’m done discussing those events with you. We have other things to focus on.”

Jeb’s eyes widened in confusion and misunderstanding. Trying to look after his daughter... What? What did Keruni have to do with what they had been talking about? Jeb stared up at the Emperor with a stunned, baffled expression and an uneasy frown spread across his face. Nothing Zerone said had made any sense at all, but somehow it seemed like he believed Jeb knew exactly what he was talking about. Jeb shook his head in confusion and tried to stifle a sigh. Why was everything always so far over his head?

Trying to shake off his annoyance and unease, he thought back to the conversation he had had with Secka about the fire and felt a shiver of wonder go through him. Without thinking, he blurted out the first thought that came to mind. “Carita died in that fire, didn’t she?” He looked up to face Zerone and regretted his words instantly.

Shock gleamed in the Emperor’s gaze, but when he whipped around to stare at Jeb, his eyes narrowed in an expression of fury and hatred. Gritting his teeth and lashing his tail, he glared at Jeb and let out a dangerous snarl. “Whatever happened to Carita is my business and my business only. You’ve got no right to go around saying things like that and trying to accuse animals of doing horrible things.”

Jeb gaped in disbelief. “*Accuse?* Zerone, we both know you started the fire. So...you killed Carita.”

An enraged snarl rumbled in the Emperor’s throat and his burning, furious eyes made Jeb wince with fear. “Stop playing games with my head!” he spat.

Jeb’s eyes widened in shock. “*I’m* the one messing with *your* head?”

Zerone let out a low growl. “Leave Carita out of this.”

Jeb blinked, then narrowed his eyes defiantly. “No. That’s what you meant when you asked if I knew who died in the fire, isn’t it?” He stared at Zerone for a long time, feeling a sudden wave of horror wash over him. Feeling almost sick and stunned, he gazed at Zerone with wide, frightened blue and green eyes. “Did you mean to kill her?”

Zerone lashed his tail with an infuriated growl. Keeping his gaze locked on the ground, he let out a low, irritated snarl. "It's better that she's dead, but no, I did *not* kill her!" He faced Jeb with a cold, dangerous glare. "We are never talking about this again. Ever! Now shut up and never speak to me again."

Jeb stared at him with wide, baffled blue and green eyes, but before he could open his mouth to say anything, Telku's voice sounded from ahead.

"Zerone, Jeb, come here," he called, creeping forward to peer through the branches of a thick bush. "I think we've found the main light-holder."

Blinking in surprise and frowning, the two hesitated for a long moment, then cautiously stepped forward. Their fur prickled with discomfort as they both ducked into the bush beside Telku. Pushing a clump of thick branches out of his way, Jeb wriggled forward and peered through the leaves. His eyes widened with surprise and a feeling of relief spread through his body when he saw what was on the other side.

Several outlaws stood a few feet away at the top of a small, grassy slope, gazing triumphantly down at a small trench they had dug in the dirt. A large light-holder lay still in the dirt in front of them.

Smiling with hope, Telku pushed himself to his paws and padded toward the grassy slope, flicking his tail to indicate for Jeb and Zerone to follow. After a long moment of hesitation, the two slowly crept out of the bush and trailed uneasily after Telku. Jeb's fur prickled with fear and unease as he picked his way up the side of the slope to stand just a few paces away from the crowd of outlaws.

One of them looked up in surprise then let a smirk spread across his face. "Telku, Jeb, I think we found it." He opened his mouth to say more, then paused and frowned when he caught sight of Zerone picking his way uncomfortably up the slope to stand beside them. "Hey, what's he doing—oh, who cares?" The outlaw broke off and just rolled his eyes. "I guess I don't care what he's doing here. So long as we cut this thing."

Telku glanced down at the light-holder lying in the trench, his eyes glimmering in anticipation. "Do you think the others will be here soon?"

As he spoke, a group of outlaws appeared from behind another bush surrounding the clearing. Glancing around warily, they padded up the side



of the slope to join them while another group of outlaws poked their heads out through another clump of bushes to investigate their surroundings. After a few moments of waiting, two familiar yellow and gray kraguers stepped out from behind a tree and padded forward with guarded looks.

Citcha's eyes gleamed with excitement when she spotted the light-holder and she bounded forward with a leap and a wild laugh. Secka followed slowly behind her, his eyes narrowed in boredom, but his tail twitching with the tiniest hint of interest.

"We've all been led here," Citcha exclaimed, a wide, eerie sneer spreading across her face when she crept up to hover over the light-holder. "This must be it!"

"Hurry, cut it," Jati exclaimed, racing after Citcha and Secka and lunging up the slope to stand beside the thief. Darting forward, she dug her claws into the vine and sawed at it as quickly as she could, her blue and gray eyes gleaming in determination. Several criminals stepped forward and dug their claws into the light-holder.

Taking a deep breath, Jeb slowly turned to stare out at the forest behind him. Tiny specks of yellow light from the creatures' dens shone somewhere in the distance, piercing through the shadows of the night. His heart beat rapidly in his chest and his eyes narrowed with unease when quiet cheers of triumph rang out among the clearing. A tiny snapping sound suddenly filled the air. A second later, the bright yellow lights flickered out, throwing the forest into darkness once and for all.

# Chapter Eight

## Fruitless Research

“I just don’t understand it.” Saderia looked up from her breakfast to see her mother scowling down at the table. The Queen heaved a long sigh and looked up to face her family. “How could the electricity have gone out all at once?”

“It’s eerie,” Cia murmured, glancing uneasily from side to side. “If you ask me, this forest is cursed.”

“I agree,” Uncle Jash muttered. “This place is unlivable.”

Makero let out a long breath and stared silently down at his breakfast.

Saderia leaned forward and rested her head between her paws. A week had passed since the mass power outage, but when she closed her eyes, she could still picture the glowing yellow lights piercing through the undergrowth and then disappearing into the darkness of the night. She felt a shiver race down her spine when she imagined the soft rustling in the bushes and the creepy shadows darting just out of sight. Her mind whirled with confusion and wonder when she thought back to the unnerving creatures. Had they just been figments of her imagination or something else?

Shaking the thoughts away, she lifted her head just enough to look down and avoid the troubled gazes of her family members. She remembered whirling around in the pitch black woods to race back to her home. Even after a week had passed, she could still feel her heart pounding with terror, as if it was happening right at that moment. The light scars on her shoulders tingled with imaginary pain when she recalled shoving past stinging branches and thick undergrowth, desperate to get back home. She could almost feel her breath catch in her throat the same way it had when she had bolted around a tree and almost slammed into Dash. Their fight had seemed to disappear at the sight of the fear and alarm in his wide amber eyes. Once he had led her back to their den, they had found Saderia’s

parents and aunt and uncle awake and unnerved by the sound of the snap. The last week had been spent responding to complaints from the forest animals and reassuring the kingdom once they all realized the lights were gone and not coming back.

Fear, anger, and uncertainty hung over the forest like a dark, threatening cloud. Even more ominous was the looming mystery of *why* the lights had gone out. Wild theories flew around the forest, and secrecy and mistrust ran rampant. Animals seemed to run to the King and Queen by the hour with questions and pleas for help, leaving them barely any time to investigate. The days passed by so quickly she barely had time to catch her breath and the mystery remained unsolved. Pressure weighed down on her and thousands of worries seemed to swirl through her mind. In addition to the worry about the lights, she could feel the stress surrounding Karenisha and Makero and the uncomfortable tension crackling between herself and Dash.

She had unofficially forgiven him for what he had said. It was clear that he felt bad for making her upset and she had given up trying to stay mad at Dash. Trying to remain angry at him took too much out of her and there were much more important things for her to worry about. Every time she passed him, though, she could sense his sorrow, and every time she thought of talking to him, she realized it was already too late. They hardly ever had time to speak to each other anymore without being afraid of snapping at each other. He probably didn't even know she had forgiven him.

It was also a rare moment to be able to speak to the King and Queen. Dark bags hung under their dull amber and green eyes and even their fur looked tired and faded. Cuts and flecks of blood covered their bodies and their orange fur had become tangled and matted. Their ribs stuck out through their fur and they seemed to be growing thinner by the day. Seeing them was a constant reminder of the hard job they had to carry out. For days they left and didn't return until some horrible hour of the night, responding to pleas for help from all over the forest. By the looks of them, Saderia could tell how hard they worked to help the forest, but she could only imagine how difficult it was to endure the forest animals' suspicious glares. Ever since the electricity cut out, the animals' trust had been waning and they weren't afraid to show it.

With a long sigh, Karenisha slowly looked up from her meal, her amber eyes blazing with a familiar glow of determination. “I suppose the electricity mystery can wait. It’s not the most important thing right now.” She looked around at Saderia, Dash, Cia, and Uncle Jash. “Every time Makero and I get called out to help the forest, it’s because of a disaster. Yesterday geysers erupted around the panther neighborhood and scalded them. Before that, a flood wiped out the jaguars’ neighborhood. And before that, pitfalls opened up beneath the lion neighborhood, swallowed almost all of their dens, and nearly took the lions down with them.” She looked around with dark amber eyes. “The loss of electricity hasn’t killed anyone yet. The disasters have. We have to find a way to stop them.”

“But how?” Makero asked, looking a bit more animated. “We don’t know anything about this forest or the disasters.”

Karenisha’s eyes gleamed. “Then we’ll find out more.” She stood up with a flick of her tail. “Today Makero and I have to make our rounds around the forest, but tonight we are going to hold an experiment to find out everything we can about this new forest.”

The experiment was one of the oddest things Saderia had witnessed. Silvery light shone in from the moon and stars outside and pierced through the gloom shrouding the den. Saderia, Dash, Cia, and Uncle Jash hovered around the rocky table beside Karenisha and Makero, blinking sleep out of their eyes and trying to hold their heads up. The moonlight bathed their fur in a shining patch of gray, but even against the light, they could see Saderia’s eyes glowing with excitement. Carefully unearthed flowers and a rough, cracked pot filled with still, dark blue water sat around the table, illuminated by the glow. The samples Karenisha had brought home seemed to stare them down as they started the discussion about the forest they had always meant to have.

“All right,” Karenisha began. “I think it’s clear that this forest doesn’t make sense to anyone with a rational mind. The disasters, the strange plants, and everything else we’ve witnessed have made this forest strange and even dangerous. One of the biggest questions we have is why this forest is even here when it’s surrounded on all sides by desert. That question must have an answer, but to find it, we’ll go a bit closer to home. We’ll have to answer some of the smaller questions to ever understand this

forest. For instance, why is the river water poisonous when the fruit is perfectly safe to eat? If something poisoned the rivers, then it would only make sense for it to poison the fruit, but clearly it hasn't. Also, why are the plants such strange colors and why are there so many disasters that seem to occur randomly and so often?"

"This forest is definitely strange," Makero agreed. "It was weird enough when we came out of our own forest to see desert, but our old forest was huge and stretched out far in many directions. I know it wasn't right in the middle of the huge desert, like this forest, and it seems odd that a complete forest like this should just spring up out of the sand and then abruptly end on all sides."

Saderia and Dash exchanged a curious glance. According to the laws of the natural world, this forest didn't make any sense whatsoever... could it have been created by something unnatural?

"For now," Karenisha went on, "let's just stick with the small questions instead of the big ones. The disasters are all that matter now. If they don't stop terrorizing the forest, we'll all be gone in a week. We've got to find some way to deal with them without running around all the time or waiting for some animal to come running for help. We'll look at the water first. We'll have to use our eyes and that alone to study it. Everyone look for anything unusual and we'll go from there."

Without a word, everyone turned their eyes to the pot of river water and focused intently on it. Saderia wasn't sure what she was looking for, but she hardly dared to blink as she stared at the water, trying to penetrate it with her gaze and learn its odd secrets. Her eyes remained locked on the deep blue color of the water and everything else seemed to fade away. The shining moonlight and the soft breath of her family members faded into the background as she studied the water's depths, searching for anything out of the ordinary. Suddenly, before she could blink, the dark blue water flashed with a bright, almost neon blue glow that lasted for less than half a second. Saderia blinked and the glow had already disappeared, but the water had started to tremble in its pot. The water that had been still just a moment ago began to ripple and slide back and forth. Within a few seconds, it was thrashing violently against the sides of the pot.

Saderia stared at the pot with wide, stunned eyes until another fleeting, almost undetectable dark blue glow lit up the water. The second

the flash of color illuminated the surface, the water began to slow down and settle back into stillness, seeming almost reluctant. Everyone seemed to blink at the same time to break the spell of stunned silence.

“Did you see that?” Saderia whispered.

Dash looked up with wide eyes. “That blue glow? Yes, I saw it.”

“I saw it,” Karenisha murmured, while Uncle Jash gave them a nod to show he had, as well.

Makero frowned in confusion. “What are you talking about? I saw something, but I’m not sure what.”

“I think I must have blinked too much,” Cia spoke up. “I didn’t see anything except the water suddenly starting to churn like...”

“Like a flood,” Dash finished, a light of realization flashing in his tired amber eyes. “That blue glow lit up the water right before the water started churning and then after it flashed again, the water settled down.”

Saderia blinked in surprise. “Do you mean that blue glow controls the flooding?”

“It might,” Karenisha said frowning in wonder. “But what controls the glow?”

“I don’t know, but it sure looked like it controlled the flooding. The way it settled down afterward is like how the water settles into a new river bed,” Uncle Jash added.

“So it doesn’t just find a new place to settle, per se,” Makero said slowly. “But this glow defines where it stops and settles instead.”

Cia sniffed and raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “And I suppose the ground just complies with that?”

Saderia frowned. “Maybe the glow only happens after it has found a new place to settle. I mean, in the pot, it still had a place and it was contained, so it couldn’t go anywhere...”

“Saderia, you’re a genius!” Karenisha shouted, making everyone jump and blink at her in surprise. Her eyes glowed with excitement. “If the rivers work like the water in this pot, then we might have at least found a solution to the floods! If the water can’t find anywhere else to settle, it’ll just have to stay where it is! So if we build walls around the rivers that are just high enough to keep the rivers in its place, things will be fine and we won’t have to worry about floods.”

“That’s a brilliant idea!” Makero exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. “We’ll get started on it first thing in the morning! I’m sure someone will be willing to test whether it works or not. Then, if it does, we can use this idea for the rest of the forest, too!”

Looking excited, the King and Queen turned their attention back to the table. “All right,” said Karenisha, “we have a solution for the flood... Now let’s look at this plant and see what’s inside it to see if it can give us any hint as to how this forest was created.”

“I’ve got it.” Makero carefully unsheathed a claw and ran it swiftly down the blue stem of the plant to make a clean slice from top to bottom.

Saderia watched the plant intently, letting her gaze trail upward from the dark blue roots, stem, and leaves, to the light blue and yellow-speckled flower petals blossoming out onto the table. When she hesitantly put a paw against the plant, the roots felt thick and fat, the flower petals stiff and hard, and the leaves spiny and needle-sharp.

Using his claws to pry open the cut sides of the stem, Makero carefully peered inside while the others huddled around him. A bright, neon green glow emanated from inside the plant, and when they looked closer, they could see pulsing lines of neon green running up the stem like veins. The six of them exchanged a long, baffled glance before turning back to the flower. After a hesitation, Karenisha ran her claw down one of the rough leaves and peeled back the blue sides around the cut. The same neon glow spilled out of the plant, but when Saderia looked inside, she could see tight bundles of a powdery substance packed into the leaves. Blue powder took up most of the leaves and gave the neon glow a dark blue tint, but she could see a tiny amount of yellow powder as well.

Saderia and Dash exchanged a confused glance. With a look back at them, Karenisha stepped back and made one final cut along one of the thick roots. Instead of a bright neon glow, they were met with a surge of grayish water. The water spilled out of the roots and slapped against the floor the instant her claw met the plant. The whole plant seemed to sag and wilt before their eyes as the water pumped out of the roots. The green glow from inside the stem and leaves seemed to grow dimmer.

Saderia blinked in shock. The only thing they had gained from the study of the plant was more confusion and questions. How could such a strange plant survive and what could have possibly created it? It couldn’t

have been made by anything natural, but if it wasn't, then what *had* made the plants so weird and caused the whole forest to form in the middle of the desert?

Questions whirled around in her mind, but before she could give voice to any of them, Dash let out a long yawn despite his efforts to conceal it.

Karenisha glanced over at them with a sympathetic expression. "Perhaps you two should get to bed. Your father and I will start working on the solution to the floods. You two just worry about getting some rest."

Saderia hesitated, then reluctantly nodded. "All right. Tell us if you need help."

Karenisha smiled and murmured goodnight as they started to turn around. Saderia and Dash smiled back and padded sleepily back to their rooms, trying not to let their eyelids droop with exhaustion. Behind them, they could hear the tap of paw steps as the King and Queen headed into the forest, while Cia and Uncle Jash retreated to their room.

Dash cast a glance back at Karenisha and Makero. "So they're just going to go to the different animals in charge of the neighborhoods and ask if they can test their idea?"

Saderia nodded. "At least one of them has to accept the idea."

He stared down at his paws. "I hope so."

Saderia gave another uncomfortable nod, then paused. "Hey, Dash?"

"Yeah?" They stopped at the entrances to their bedrooms and faced each other.

Saderia hesitated and looked down. "I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you anymore."

Relief spread over his face. "Thanks. I'm sorry too."

Saderia managed a weak smile and felt a tiny flash of relief, but the smile soon faded into a sense of worry and unease. "I shouldn't have snapped at you. I...I guess I'm just so tense with everything that's going on. I mean..." She hesitated and closed her eyes with a soft sigh. "I just can't stop worrying and being afraid. Things seem to go so well one moment, and then everything just falls apart the next. I'm so tired of having my hopes crushed. This forest is like a ticking time bomb and I can't help but wonder if some disaster is going to destroy someone else, or if we could have done something to stop all the bad things that have happened, or..." She trailed



off in defeat. “I worry about Mom and Dad, too. They’re running themselves into the ground and I’m so scared something will happen to them, or to Cia and Uncle Jash, or one of our friends. And then when I think about...him and how he died, it just makes everything worse.”

Dash let out a soft sigh and gently rested his tail on her shoulder. “Relax,” he whispered. “Karenisha and Makero know what to watch out for and they’ll look after each other. They probably worry about us as much as we worry about them. Cia and Jash are fine, too, and I’m sure all of our friends are doing okay. They can all look after themselves and they all have someone they can depend on, like we have each other. As for the disasters, there’s nothing we could have done to help them anymore than we did. We’ve risked our lives to help animals out of the disasters and that’s all anybody can do. We’ll keep helping anyone in need and we’ll be able to save them like we’ve already done even if a disaster does happen again.

“As for Dingo...you know he would have wanted you to be happy. I miss him, too, and it’s okay to remember him and miss him, but he would have begged you not to let this destroy you and to get on with your life. Everything is fine right now, and things will get better. The experiment has proved that. Everything will be fine. You just have to stop worrying and believe that everything will get better and that we’ll be able to deal with anything that happens.”

He glanced out at the darkening sky with bright, glowing amber eyes and gave her a tender smile. “Come on. Let’s get some sleep.”

Saderia managed a tight smile and a weak nod. “You’re right, that’s probably a good idea.” She started to turn around to go into her room, then paused and looked back over her shoulder. “What you said—is that what you tell yourself to keep going?”

Dash paused at the entrance to his room, glanced back at her, and smiled warmly. “No, I don’t have to. I have you.”

“Yilonna, the lynx leader, liked the idea.” Makero beamed around at his family over breakfast as he made the announcement. “She’s agreed to let us test out our flood theory on a river near her home. We’ve already set up some walls along it to start the barricade. The lynx helped us and some other breeds joined in—there was a bit of tension between them, but we got it done. Soon we’ll be able to see whether it works or not.”

Saderia smiled as she took a bite of her food, feeling a tiny hint of excitement. Catching the bright, encouraging gleam in Dash's eyes, she couldn't help but smile.

"I've got some news," Cia spoke up, looking around at the others. "Jash and I have been going to this huge warehouse for the past few days like you asked, Karenisha, where we've been trying to make some new things for the animals, like the stuff we had back in our old forest. A lot of other animals have been helping us make things and we've gotten a lot done. Mattresses, pillows, and towels are nearly finished, and in a few week's time, we should have enough for the whole kingdom."

"That's great!" Karenisha smiled and happily flicked her tail. "We'll announce it to the forest today, right before we head off to the lynx neighborhood."

Saderia felt a tingle of hope. Her aunt and uncle had been leaving for a few hours each day, but she hadn't known where they had been going. "Why didn't you tell us about it before?"

Uncle Jash shrugged and grinned. "Well, your mom pointed us to the warehouse and asked if we would direct the animals to make things—she and your father wanted to do it, but they didn't have time. We've been quiet about it because we wanted to make sure we could do it first, but we also wanted it to be a surprise."

Saderia grinned. "Well, I'm definitely surprised. This will be really great if we can have some of the things we had before."

Makero nodded and grinned. "We're sure it will make the forest animals happy, and if nothing else, at least it will take their mind off of other things. As soon as everything is finished, we'll hold a meeting to hand it out to all of them."

"Speaking of meetings, we had better go if we want to hold one and make it to the lynx neighborhood to make some progress with the flood barricade." Karenisha pulled herself to her paws and glanced toward Makero, who quickly nodded and finished the last of his meal, then leapt up to join her. The Queen glanced around at the four of them and flicked her tail. "We'll be back as soon as we can. Cia and Jash, you can go back to the warehouse and keep up the good work. Saderia and Dash..." She leveled her gaze with them and narrowed her eyes. "Stay here."

Saderia and Dash nodded meekly, shrinking away from her intense stare. Karenisha gave them a long look, then finally nodded and waved goodbye. Cia and Uncle Jash hurried after them as they headed toward the entrance to the den, waving goodbye to Saderia and Dash. The soft sounds of their paw steps against the grass slowly began to fade, and when they peered outside, the only thing they could see were four splotches of orange disappearing into the woods.

Saderia let out a long breath and turned silently back to the table. Dash brushed his tail lightly across her shoulder and gave her an encouraging smile that she weakly returned. Glancing down at the craggy table, she slowly started picking at her meal. Her mind wandered back to last night as she nibbled absent-mindedly on her food and she remembered her words as clearly as if she had spoken them out loud. Pressure and anxiety settled over her like a heavy blanket when she thought about all the concerns she had voiced. There seemed to be so much work that needed to be done to the forest to make it even moderately livable. She stared down at her food as if seeing it for the first time and felt a surge of frustration and outrage. There was so much work and yet she and Dash weren't allowed to help at all. They had been confined to the den and ordered to stay put while everyone else took care of the problems.

Anger burned in her chest, but it gradually cooled with her sigh of resignation. It wasn't like they could do anything anyway. Karenisha and Makero were already making progress on the flood barriers and helping the others, and Cia and Uncle Jash had almost finished everything they had been working on in the warehouse. Karenisha and Makero and Cia and Uncle Jash already had everything covered...except... Her eyes widened and a dark memory flashed through her mind. The burning yellow glow of the lights piercing through the trees illuminated her vision until suddenly a snap echoed throughout the forest, plunging it into blackness.

Blinking rapidly, Saderia opened her eyes wide and let the memory disappear, but her heart beat just as fast with a new, raw curiosity. With everything else going on, her family had had no time to investigate the power outage. Maybe now was their chance...

"Dash..." She looked over at him and hesitated uneasily.

He looked up and blinked. "What?"

She paused for a long moment, then looked up to meet his eyes. "Mom and Dad and Cia and Uncle Jash won't be home for a while. While they're gone, why don't we go check out the main wire that routed all the electricity and see if something happened there to make all the electricity go out."

Dash frowned. "But your parents said to stay."

Saderia raised an eyebrow. "They're not around to stop us or see us."

"Good point." He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully and hesitated for a long moment before giving her a cautious shrug. "I guess we might as well try it. It can't hurt...I think."

Her eyes lit up with excitement. "All right. Then let's go!"

Without waiting for a reply, she jumped to her paws and darted toward the entrance of the den. Dash stumbled clumsily to his paws behind her and struggled to keep up. A blast of cool, morning air and the soft, dew-scented grass welcomed them as soon as they set paw outside. The enormous woods seemed to swallow them up the instant they darted into the thick, endless expanse of trees. Fallen leaves and twigs crackled under their paws as they raced through the woods and crashed through colorful bushes and undergrowth. Strange plants loomed up on either side of them, reaching out with disfigured branches and leaves, but Saderia pushed past them and turned to lead the way to the main wire. She had been there only once, but the trail seemed etched in her mind.

Zigzagging in and out of trees, she darted through a clump of bushes and broke out into a wide clearing. The trees seemed to melt away on either side and the grass grew thinner farther away from the woods. Saderia and Dash loped up a small hill to the center of the clearing and paused when they reached the top.

"The main wire's supposed to be right here..." Saderia's voice trailed off when she stared down at the ground and a dark frown spread across her face. Dash followed her gaze and blinked in surprise. The earth and grass around the place where the wire was buried was churned up in clumps of soil, as if someone had been trying to dig something up. The two of them exchanged a long, uneasy glance, then quickly leaned forward to dig up the wire. The earth gave in with little resistance and Saderia threw up

handfuls of dirt, creating a tiny trench. Finally, she brushed away a few flecks of dirt and gasped in shock.

The main wire laid in the dirt in front of them, split in two by a rough, jagged cut. Ragged wires hung limply out of the severed ends of the wire and laid uselessly against the earth. Dirt stained the cold wire and the way it had been sliced gave her the feeling she had unearthed a crime scene.

“So this is why the electricity went out,” Dash murmured, his eyes wide with disbelief.

Saderia blinked and cautiously turned around to survey her surroundings, feeling her fur bristle with unease. Her heart began to beat faster when she peered at the dirt and sparse grass climbing up the hill and a sharp gasp tore out of her throat when she spotted tiny, almost unnoticeable marks on the ground.

Hardly daring to breathe, Saderia crept closer to the tiny marks. Dash looked up in surprise, then gaped in amazement when he saw what she had. She could feel her heart beating rapidly in her chest as they slipped over to the strange marks on the ground. Her heart missed a beat when she realized what they were: paw prints.

Narrowing her eyes, Saderia gently pressed her own paw into the dirt until she had left a mark beside the original one, then drew back to examine them side by side. Her paw print was considerably larger than the tiny print indented in the earth, but they seemed to look the same. Each had a large, somewhat circular mark for the paw pad and then the four smaller, oval-shaped marks for the toes; there were even tiny tips to the toes of each print, an indication of claws. But there was something much stranger about the small paw prints in front of her. There was another mark between the toes. The indent between each toe was incredibly light and hard to make out, but when she peered closely at it, she could see the same mark connecting all four toes. It almost seemed like some kind of webbing...but what creature other than amphibians would have that kind of paw print?

Her heart began to beat faster. The alien prints were hard to make out and identify, but one thing was clear: all of the paw prints were pointing toward the wire and every print led straight up the hill and ended right in front of the disturbed earth. Visions of the eerie shadows she had seen flitting past the glowing electrical lights danced through her mind. Whoever

or whatever those creatures were, the message was clear. Someone was trying to sabotage them.

# Chapter Nine

## Sabotage

“We have something to report this time.” Emperor Zerone looked around at the kraguers in front of him with dark green and gray eyes.

Telku looked up to meet his eyes and nodded. “So do we. You first.”

Zerone frowned and hesitated. Jeb shivered and looked up at the Emperor and his father, who sat less than a few feet away from each other. Moonlight shimmered down through the thick canopy, casting silvery light over the kraguers’ yellow and black-striped fur. The white glow of the moonlight dappled the thick, wild grass and speckled the dense bushes surrounding the wide clearing in the woods. A huge, glimmering pool of water turned white by the moonlight stretched out just a few paces away from them, lapping at the tiny ring of light brown sand that ran around the edge of the pond.

Telku stood just a few paces away from the huge pool of water, facing Zerone with narrowed eyes. Behind him sat Jati, Citcha, and Secka. The usual look of boredom and apathy dulled Secka’s gray eyes, but Jati and Citcha’s blue/gray and pale blue eyes glimmered with interest. Zerone sat just a few feet away from Telku, facing him with the same challenging stare. Several kraguers from his Court sat spread out behind him, regarding the outlaws with cold, warning glares. Jeb sat several feet off to the side among the bushes in between the two different sides. Unfortunately, Zerone had brought his daughter along with him and sat her down right beside him. Her eyes were narrowed in wonder and locked on the kraguers in front of them, too focused on what they were saying to bother him. While she watched them, her fur prickled with discomfort and unease at being out in the open. Clearly she didn’t get dragged into her father’s affairs often. Jeb turned away from her and tried not to let his fur prickle at her nearness.

After Zerone and the outlaws had destroyed the light, Jeb had gone back to the Spring with his father and sat off to the side while Telku announced his plan to meet with Zerone to discuss what to do about the

creatures. Every single outlaw had protested when they first heard the idea. Jeb still shivered when he remembered their outraged snarls. Thankfully, Telku had given them a few days to think about it. After a lot of time had passed by, a lot of them grudgingly admitted that it was a decent idea. Secka had quickly offered to go with them to the meetings, and with his approval, the rest of them slowly warmed up to the idea and offered to go, as well. From the looks of the kraguers stationed behind him, Jeb could see Zerone had won the approval of his Court, as well.

Several brief meetings had already passed by without anything to report. Telku and Zerone shared their observations that the creatures hadn't yet figured out what had happened to their light, but other than a few hopeful remarks about getting away with it, neither of them really knew what to say. This meeting seemed different.

Jeb shivered and glanced fearfully over both shoulders, wondering if they were being watched by creatures. Being out in the wide open clearing made him feel cold with fear whenever they met to discuss plans, but it couldn't be helped. Taking a shaky breath, Jeb turned to face the kraguers and tried to pay attention to what they were saying.

Glancing back and forth between Telku and Zerone, his eyes slowly wandered to the huge, glimmering white pond spread out just a few feet in front of him. His heart skipped a beat at the sight of the eerie, mysterious Sight Pond. As one of the only pools of water in the entire forest that didn't flood, the Sight Pond was special to the kraguers. The clearing surrounding the pond had always seemed free of the disasters that plagued the rest of the forest; not even the fire had seemed to touch it. Zerone and the Emperors and Empresses before him had always gone to the Sight Pond in times of crisis to speak to it or 'communicate' with it with a special scepter. Rumor had it that the Emperor was able to read signs in the strange waters that helped him whenever the kraguers had trouble.

Staring at the pond, Jeb couldn't help but wonder if Zerone had talked to the water yet and searched for a sign as to what to do about the creatures. If he *had* received an answer to the problem, though, Jeb doubted Zerone would agree to meeting with the outlaws to form a plan. Shaking off his thoughts, he glanced intently back and forth between his father and the Emperor, hoping that somehow they would find a solution to the problem to avoid being forced to leave the only home where they were safe.



“Well...” Zerone drew out the word, making everyone roll their eyes in frustration. “I’ve seen the creatures put up these strange barricades around the rivers.”

Jati frowned. “Are they mad? Why would they do that?”

Secka glanced up with a bored look and shrugged. “Probably to stop the floods.”

Telku frowned, his green eyes narrowing thoughtfully. “Could be,” he murmured. “The floods *are* pretty annoying, so maybe they have found a solution that works.”

Citcha gaped at them in outrage. “Why didn’t we think of that?”

“Focus, Citcha,” Telku growled, giving her a warning look. “Zerone, is that all?”

“So far, yes.” He narrowed his eyes. “And it’s *Emperor* Zerone.”

Telku ignored his growl. “We’ve found something, too. Citcha found a strange place the other day that belongs to the creatures. It had some odd stuff inside. Citcha?”

“What? Oh, yeah.” A light came on in her eyes and she looked up at Zerone at an expectant glance from Telku. “Yeah, it was really weird. It’s hard to describe, but I found this huge den in a clearing out in the forest. I’ve seen the creatures going back and forth to that den for a while and I looked inside of it. There were these long, thin, soft blue things in kind of a square shape. They felt warm when I tried wrapping one around me, and I think they might use them to stay warm. I tried laying on them. It felt good, too...”

“I take it you stole one,” Secka muttered with a roll of his eyes.

Citcha let out a hiss. “Hey, there were a million of them! They’ll never notice!” Bristling furiously, she lashed her tail. “Don’t interrupt me! Now where was I? Oh, yeah. Anyway, there was that big, long, soft thing they could lay on. Maybe they put it over stuff to make it softer...what a cool idea...but there was other stuff, too. There were these hard, hollowed out rock-looking things. Maybe they use them for storing stuff...I don’t know. But there was a lot of stuff in there that they made and it looked really neat.”

“Thank you.” Telku gave her a nod, then turned back to face Zerone. “Well, you heard what she said about all the stuff they created. And if the creatures are going through all that work to make this stuff...”

“...then they plan on staying,” Zerone muttered. “I was afraid of that.”

Jeb shivered in fear and saw some of Zerone’s kraguers shudder in unease.

One of Zerone’s kraguers looked up in alarm. “What do we do about it?”

Zerone looked back and gave the kraguer a dark, warning glare, making him shrink back with a look of alarm, before turning around to face Telku.

Citcha looked up and narrowed her eyes before Telku could speak. “Hey, we could do what we did with the light and just...destroy everything.”

Secka frowned thoughtfully. “I kind of like that idea. But there’s a problem. If we destroy all their stuff, how is that *not* going to seem suspicious?”

Citcha blinked and looked down at her paws. “Hmm...I hadn’t thought of that...”

Telku frowned and narrowed his eyes in thought, but before he could speak, Zerone glanced around at the outlaws and raised his voice.

“I have an idea,” he began with a cautious, uncertain glance. “We had no idea that creatures like the ones that invaded our forest existed before they came here, right?”

“I suppose, but what are you getting at?” Telku replied, frowning. “Well? Out with it, Zerone, so we can get this over with.”

“All right, all right,” the Emperor snapped, lashing his tail. After giving Telku a long, cold glare, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Well, if we didn’t know that creatures like them existed until now, then how could they have any clue what we are? How would they know that we exist? I somehow doubt they have animals like us living in the place they came from, so to them, we might seem strange. They should have no idea we’re here. So...we can destroy all the stuff we want and it still won’t dawn on them that we are the ones doing it. In fact...” A cold sneer suddenly spread across his face. “In fact, they might actually suspect each other of destroying it and turn on each other. And if they turn on each other and destroy each other, it works just as well for us, right?”

Jeb blinked at his light, cool tone and felt a shiver of unease race down his spine. The creatures seemed creepy, but something about Zerone's idea just didn't seem right.

Jati licked her lips and grinned. "In that case, I know something that could work just as well. Citcha, you were talking about how great some of the stuff in that den was, weren't you? Well, why don't we just take it for ourselves? That way we would be benefiting from it and the creatures would just think some of their own kind had taken it."

Zerone narrowed his eyes and glared at her. "I don't think that's a good idea."

She bristled. "Why? Because it wasn't *your* idea, oh 'great' Emperor?"

Telku heaved a sigh. "Jati..."

"Shut up, Telku!" She glared at the Emperor. "What's so wrong with it, Zerone?"

"I'll tell you what's wrong with it," Telku interrupted, narrowing his eyes at her and sharply flicking his tail. "It's too easy to prove that the creatures didn't take it. All the creatures would have to do is check the dens of all the others and if the stolen items aren't in any of their homes, they would start to get suspicious."

Jati gritted her teeth. "Since when are you and Zerone on the same page?"

Telku heaved a sigh. "Since all this madness began. It's a thoughtful idea, Jati, but I don't think we should risk it. It will be harder for the creatures to rule out any suspects if we just destroy everything in the den and don't leave behind any evidence."

"I agree," Zerone muttered with a cool glance from Jati to Telku. "Not to mention, once this is over, I can get the best kraguers to make things similar to the ones we'll see at the den and give them to everyone in my Court. You outlaws can do whatever you want."

Citcha and Jati bristled in fury and let out sharp, outraged hisses, but Telku and Secka just sighed and rolled their eyes.

"Whatever, Zerone," Telku muttered. "Let's just deal with this problem first. Save your bragging for later."

Ignoring his comment, Zerone simply nodded. "All right then, it's agreed. We'll go to that den tonight with a bunch of kraguers and tell them

to wreck everything in sight. There's about a million things that could go wrong, but we might as well try it."

"We'll need sentries," Secka muttered, apathetically flexing his claws. "To watch out for the creatures while we're inside. If they see anything, we'll have to run."

Zerone blinked, then nodded and looked away. "Oh, yes, right. Good idea, I was just about to suggest it myself..."

Secka rolled his eyes. "Yeah, whatever, Zerone."

Telku glanced back and forth between Zerone and the gray outlaw, then let out a soft breath. "All right, Citcha, Secka, Jati, and I will return to the Spring to get some kraguers to help us. Zerone, you'll go back to your Court to get some of your kraguers to help. We'll each pick two sentries. That way it's fair and none of us have any reason to distrust each other. Once we're all ready, we'll meet up at the den."

"Right," Zerone growled, nodding his head. "Keruni, you wait in the entrance to my Court while I get everyone ready. I don't want you up here where you could get hurt."

Keruni's eyes widened in hope and she nodded rapidly. "Thank you, Daddy." Whipping around, she darted away from Jeb and dove into the shadowed clump of puffy bushes behind Zerone, her brown-tufted tail disappearing from sight.

Narrowing his eyes, Jeb silently crept back toward Telku, hoping they could leave. Telku looked up at him when he heard Jeb's paw steps and narrowed his eyes. "Jeb, you go wait with Keruni in the entrance to Zerone's Court. Any objections, Zerone?"

The Emperor narrowed his eyes, seeming to search for some sort of protest, but after a long hesitation, he finally nodded. Flicking his tail irritably through the air, he grabbed Jeb's leg and turned him around to pull him forward in the direction of the Court.

Jeb winced and tried to suppress a cry of alarm. Stumbling forward, he cast a glance back at his father and shivered in unease when he saw Telku turn around and pad back toward the bushes surrounding the clearing. Jati cast a glance back at Jeb before falling into step behind him along with Citcha and Secka. The dark kraguer looked back over his shoulder and met Jeb's eyes for a small second before his gray eyes flashed and he turned around. The four outlaws pushed their way into the dense undergrowth

surrounding the clearing and disappeared behind a soft wall of rustling leaves.

Swallowing hard and trying to slow down the terrified beating of his heart, Jeb forced himself to turn around and stagger after Zerone and his kraguers. His paws stumbled clumsily along the grassy ground, accidentally crushing leaves underneath him and making him wince at the harsh sound. Zerone glared back at him with a dangerous glint in his eyes, while his guards gave him distrustful glances. Trying to ignore their hostile looks, Jeb took a deep breath and kept moving, shrinking close to the ground.

The sparkling waters of the Sight Pond disappeared behind a shadowed wall of wild bushes and ominous trees. The dark branches seemed to reach toward him as he stumbled through the thick grass. Gritting his teeth, Jeb scurried after Zerone as fast as he could, ducking under low branches and weaving around thick tree trunks. His legs shook with every step, but after what seemed like ages, he staggered out into a tiny clearing.

Jeb looked up and felt his eyes widen in hope when he spotted a long, brown stone lying across the ground, outlined by thick sprigs of shadowed grass. Recognizing the entrance to Zerone's Court, he felt his heart skip in his chest and lunged forward, desperate to get out of the surface world. Pushing past Zerone, he leapt toward the stone, then let out a quiet cry of alarm when the ground disappeared under his paws. His eyes widened in fear as he stumbled clumsily past the flat stone and fell into the dirt space that marked the entrance to the Emperor's Court. Slamming against the dirty ground and rolling painfully onto his side, he winced and tried not to let out a whimper of pain.

"Idiot!" Keruni's cold voice hissed from somewhere nearby.

Wincing and feeling his fur burn with embarrassment, Jeb slowly raised his head to look around at the shadowed, dirt-covered room. He let out a squeak of fear when Zerone leapt down into the dirt room and shoved him to the side.

"Move," the Emperor growled.

Jeb narrowed his eyes in unease and alarm and pressed himself up against the wall, feeling the dirt crumble and dust his yellow fur brown. Digging his claws into the dirt, he tried not to whimper when Zerone's creepy guards lunged down behind him. Giving him a dark glare, Zerone slowly stalked through the room toward the tiny dirt tunnel on the opposite

wall. One by one the Emperor and his guards slipped into the tunnel and disappeared behind a wall of dirt, leaving him alone with Keruni.

The Emperor's daughter sat back against the opposite wall, her bright green eyes narrowed in a cold, hostile glare. The fear and uncertainty that had haunted her gaze on the surface world had vanished and been replaced by haughtiness and snootiness the instant she entered the Court where it was safe. She curled her lip in disgust when she caught him watching her and looked away in disdain.

Jeb felt his fur prickling with embarrassment and anger. "What did I do this time?" he snapped, trying to push away the cold, lingering sense of fear.

Keruni sniffed. "Don't talk to me."

"Then don't glare at me," he retorted.

She narrowed her eyes. "I can glare at you if I want! I'm the Emperor's daughter!"

Jeb heaved a long sigh. "Fine, Keruni, do what you want. I don't care."

She snorted and flicked her tail. "Yeah, all you care about is yourself, Jeben!"

He blinked in surprise. "What? What makes you say that?"

Her brilliant green eyes glinted in the dim light and she curled her lip in disgust. "You're always snooping around in that stupid fire and it's driving my Daddy crazy! Why can't you just let your dumb mistake go and leave it in the past?"

Jeb bristled and gritted his teeth in fury. "I'm trying to figure out *why* I was blamed for it! If anyone's self-centered, it's you and your stupid father! You two are one and the same—all you ever care about are yourselves!"

Keruni blinked in shock, then looked away. Her normally bright eyes suddenly grew clouded and absent and her green irises gazed far off into the distance, as if she was seeing something else entirely. "That's not true," she murmured, her voice soft and distracted. "My Daddy cares about the whole Empire...and me."

Jeb frowned in surprise and misunderstanding. He blinked in wonder and confusion as he studied her vague, distant gaze and wondered

what had come over her. Trying to shake it off, he tried to glare at her. “Is that why he set the forest on fire?”

Keruni shook her head softly, her eyes remaining dull and lost instead of blazing with the fury and defensiveness that lit up her gaze whenever he mentioned the fire. Her voice remained quiet and vague. “It wasn’t him that set the forest on fire...”

Jeb blinked and watched her for a long moment, his eyes growing wide with wonder and incredulity. A tingle of uncertainty and discomfort raced up his spine when he realized how strange she was acting. “K-Keruni? What’s gotten into you?”

She blinked and the absent gaze suddenly faded away. Shaking herself, she let out a furious hiss, her eyes blazing with fury. Not a hint of the strange, dreamlike look tainted her glowing emerald irises. “Just stop blaming him! It wasn’t his fault!” she hissed, lashing her tail. “Just back off, Jeb! It’s none of your business!”

He stared at her in shock and disbelief, his blue and green eyes growing wide with alarm. “Keruni? Are you...okay?”

“Of course I’m okay,” she hissed, her eyes flaming with anger.

He blinked and gaped in confusion. “What...happened to you?”

Drawing back, Keruni stared at him and the glazed look crept back into her gaze. “I don’t know...” Giving her head a shake, she pushed away the absent gaze and bristled in fury. “But it doesn’t matter! Stay out of my past and out of my life!”

Jeb blinked in shock. “Keruni...what do you know about the fire?”

“That *you* started it!” she hissed.

“I didn’t start it!” He gritted his teeth and narrowed his eyes in fury before trying to push the bitterness away. “Whatever,” he muttered. “Just tell me what you know.”

She flicked her tail and sniffed. “Why should I?”

Jeb let out a long, irritated sigh and tried to hide the annoyance in his blue and green eyes. “It’s kind of important. Please, Keruni?”

Keruni glared at him for a long moment, then heaved a long, exaggerated sigh. “Well, I suppose I have no other way of passing the time.”

“Yeah...” Jeb trailed off and forced himself to give a convincing smile. “I’m sure you know a lot about it since you know so much, being the

Emperor's daughter..."

She sniffed and tried to hide a look of satisfaction. "Flattery will get you nowhere." Even as she spoke, a haughty smile crossed her face. After a long moment of hesitation, she let out a sigh. "All I know is that you started that fire and you're always blaming my Daddy for it. Oh, and if you do it again, I'll claw your face off. Got it? Because he *didn't do it!*" Her flaming eyes met his and he forced himself to bite back a furious retort. "That's about all I know except that it got rid of Cari—" She broke off and froze, her eyes suddenly growing wide with alarm. Biting her lip, she looked away from him and stared nervously down at her paws. "Never mind. That's all. Nothing else."

Jeb stared at her in shock, his eyes growing wide with alarm. Had she almost said Carita, her father's old fiancée? His previous conversation with Secka flashed through his mind, making a tiny shiver of unease slip down his spine. According to the gray outlaw, Carita had been caught in the fire. Nobody knew the exact details or how or even *when* Carita had died with all the excitement of the fire and no one had really asked. The only animal who knew was the one who had made the announcement days after Jeb and his family left the Court—and his daughter. Being the child of Zerone, Keruni probably knew a lot more about the Emperor's affairs than she let on, and since Carita had been a few weeks away from being her stepmother, she had to know the truth as well. A tremble of fear and alarm racked Jeb's body. Had Carita really been killed in the fire? Remembering Keruni's cold words, he suddenly felt a chill and a pang of nervousness. "... *got rid of...*" From the way she had said it, it almost seemed like she was glad Carita had died...

His heart started to beat rapidly with wonder and unease. Trying not to shiver, he couldn't help but think back to the days when he still lived in Zerone's Court and felt his mind whirl with memories. The day Zerone had announced that he would soon be marrying the kraguer named Carita burned in his mind. Every day that followed seemed to be filled with joy and gossip among the other kraguers. Zerone's gray and green eyes had glowed with happiness any time the kraguers saw him with Carita. Joy and light-heartedness had seemed to surround the Emperor instead of the cold air of bitterness that seemed to haunt him at the present. His voice had been tinged with delight and good humor rather than the cold, curt tone he used



now. In the days and weeks that had passed since the Emperor had announced his upcoming marriage, the kraguers had whispered about how much happier he seemed. Extravagant plans for the festivities of the marriage had been tossed back and forth. Every kraguer in the Empire had seemed excited about the royal wedding. Every kraguer except Keruni.

In a sea of happy faces and jubilant voices, her somber, miserable face stuck out in Jeb's memory. Terror and apprehension had seemed to haunt her darkened green eyes ever since Zerone had announced his impending marriage. Whenever she heard animals talking about how much livelier Zerone looked, she curled her lip in disgust and walked away or spat in their face. Any time she hung out with Jeb back when they were still friends, the only thing she talked about was Carita. Every day they met to play together, she muttered about how horrible she was and how desperate she was to have her gone.

As the days had passed by, Keruni had seemed to grow worse and worse. Her eyes had grown dull and bloodshot with hopelessness and dark bags had hung under her eyes. Her normally perfectly groomed fur had grown ragged. What stuck out most in his memory were the eerie wounds covering her body. Scars had started to line her face and sides. Every day he saw her, there seemed to be another fresh wound cutting through her fur, but whenever he asked her about it, she was vague. She had muttered that she had simply ran into prickly plants or fallen into a pitfall to get the scars. After a while, Jeb had stopped prying and had tried to ignore the fact that the cuts looked eerily like claw marks.

Keruni rarely spent any time with her father in those days. The Emperor had spent all of his time planning the details of the wedding and enthusing about how wonderful it would be to marry Carita. Whenever Jeb talked to Keruni about Zerone, she had hissed that she had done everything she possibly could to get the wedding canceled, but nothing had worked. Back in those days, seeing Keruni with Zerone was rare, but seeing the spoiled Empress-to-be with her soon-to-be stepmother was even rarer.

On the few occasions that Jeb had spotted Keruni and Carita together, Keruni's green eyes had been haunted with a look of terror. A strange, crooked smile had usually spread across Carita's face and her blue eyes had had a strange glint. No matter how hard he tried to find out why

Keruni hated her so much, though, he could never understand. After a while, he had thought she had simply been overreacting, as usual.

Shaking away the thoughts, Jeb tried to ignore a cold shiver. Looking up, he froze when he saw Keruni glaring at him with an unreadable, almost alarmed expression.

“Why did you get so quiet all of a sudden?” she hissed. “You are so *weird!*”

Jeb blinked. “Keruni...you...you didn’t...” He stared at her with wide eyes and forcefully shook his head. “Never mind. Were...were you glad that Carita was gone?”

She sniffed and looked away from him, trying to hide a glimmer of unease and confusion in her suddenly clouded green eyes. “I barely even remember her.”

Jeb stared at her in surprise. How could she seriously forget Carita when she had spent weeks hating her guts and hoping for something to take the blue-eyed kraguer out of her life? “What? You hated Carita.” He hesitated for a long moment, and nervously looked up to meet her gaze. “Maybe now you could tell my why.”

Keruni gritted her teeth and glared at him with blazing green eyes, making him jump back in alarm. “I don’t have to tell you anything!” she spat. “Carita was evil and despicable! All she is is a bad memory that *never* needs to be brought up *ever* again!”

Jeb shrank back with a whimper of alarm. “Wh-why? What did she do?”

Keruni blinked, then suddenly drew back, her green eyes glossing over and the fury fading from her gaze. Staring out at the shadowed dirt walls around them, she gazed absently out at something Jeb couldn’t see, suddenly looking dazed and distracted. “I...I don’t remember,” she murmured. “It...it was bad...She was threatening...something...” Pain and fear suddenly cut across her glazed green gaze and she squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head and letting out a hiss of fury. Her eyes flamed with anger when she opened them and she whirled around to glare at him. “It doesn’t matter! I don’t want to remember! I never wanted to remember, and I don’t! Stop bothering me!”

Jeb stared at her in alarm and started to respond, then froze. Thundering paw steps echoed in the dirt tunnel leading into Zerone’s Court

and before Jeb could turn to see what was happening, Zerone lunged out of the tunnel and let out a booming snarl.

Jumping back in terror, Jeb cowered against the wall and stared up at Zerone's furious gray and green eyes in alarm. "Z-Zerone? Wh-what's the problem?"

Zerone let out a low, infuriated snarl and glared at Jeb, his eyes flashing with rage. "I heard someone mention Carita! Stop bothering my daughter or you'll pay!"

Shivering with terror, Jeb shrank back against the wall and tried to suppress a whimper of fear. "O-Okay," he stammered. "I'm sorry!"

Zerone roasted him with a scorching glare before whirling around to face Keruni, practically shaking with rage. "Keruni. Are you coming with us or staying here?"

Keruni blinked in surprise and took a step back, looking a little shaken at her father's sudden outburst. "I...I guess I'll come with you..."

"Then stay close to me." Zerone let out a furious snarl and whipped around to glare at Jeb. "Stay by my side, and *never* speak to this *despicable* animal ever again!"

Jeb shivered and pressed himself up against the wall as hard as he could, trying to disappear out of sight to avoid Zerone's enraged gaze.

After giving him a long, warning glare through narrowed, glinting gray and green eyes, the Emperor whirled around to face the tunnel. His fur bristled and he let out a low, cold snarl. "I have to get the others and then we'll set out to get to that den." He glanced over his shoulder and let out a dangerous snarl. "And while I'm gone, *don't say one word to each other!*" Whipping around, he stormed into the tunnel with a low, fading growl, his tail giving one sharp, final lash before he disappeared from sight behind a wall of dirt.

Jeb and Keruni stared after him with wide, stunned eyes and stayed frozen to the spot even after he had gone.

Keruni blinked several times. "That was...strange. Daddy rarely gets so angry..."

Jeb wanted to tell her that her 'Daddy' seemed to have completely lost it, but he felt too shaky and terrified to say a word. Trying to shake off a cold sense of fear, he slowly raised himself up on shaky paws and stared at the dirt tunnel where Zerone had vanished. His eyes narrowed with

confusion and unease when he wondered why Zerone would hate him so much for simply mentioning Carita's name, but before he could give any thought to the unnerving idea, the loud sound of paw steps broke the tense silence.

The Emperor stalked out of the tunnel with glinting gray and green eyes and stormed out into the dirt room. Brown, yellow, and reddish kraguers followed silently behind him, their faces stony with only the slightest glimmer of fear. Zerone cast a cold, dangerous glare at Jeb before turning around and softening his gaze with concern.

"Keruni..."

"I'll be fine, Daddy," Keruni said with a flippant flick of her tail. "Can we just go and get this thing over with?" She shivered and curled her lip. "I just hope this...destruction doesn't mess up my fur. I just got done untangling it this morning."

The word 'shallow' popped into Jeb's mind with a rush of bitterness and disbelief, but he bit back his comment for fear of sending Zerone into a boiling rage.

Seeming to find it necessary to glare at Jeb out of the corner of his eye, Zerone divided his kraguers up into groups. "All of you split up into two groups of four. It will make us less conspicuous while we're traveling to this den those outlaws mentioned. Keruni, you'll come with me on our own, of course...and you too, Jeb."

Jeb's eyes widened and he looked up at Zerone in shock. "What?" Was he paranoid or did Zerone really want to keep an eye on him that badly?

"You heard me." Zerone narrowed his eyes and leaned closer to Jeb, dropping his voice to a cold, sinister whisper. "I'll be watching you."

Jeb stared at him with eyes wide with shock and disbelief, unable to speak. "What...what about my Dad?" he choked out. "Don't I go with him? And my Mom?"

Zerone glared at him. "You will see them at the den. They won't be coming here."

Jeb's heart sank and his ears flattened in dismay. His parents had just left him there? With the Emperor who seemed to hate him and everything he did? Staring miserably down at his paws, he tried to shake off a tinge of bitterness. Considering Zerone's Court was only a few minutes

away from the den they were to destroy whereas his Spring was more than half an hour away from it, he knew they had probably left him there to save him the fear of being out in the upper world for such a long time, but hadn't they considered the fear of being under Zerone's creepy green and gray glare?

Zerone looked up at the top of the room where moonlight shimmered down from the dark sky above. "Let's go," he muttered, giving Jeb a sharp lash of his tail. "Keruni, stick close to me. Jeb..." His eyes flashed and narrowed. "Watch your step."

Bright, silvery moonlight shimmered down past the leaves of the trees surrounding the wide clearing Jeb, Keruni, and Zerone stumbled into, lighting up the grass with an eerie glow. A huge, rocky den towered at the back of the clearing, its stony sides shadowed in darkness. The entrance to the den was a wide, gaping hole surrounded by jutting stones. Shadows covered the inside of the den. Many of the outlaws and Zerone's guards had already made it to the den. The silvery light of the moon shone down on their bright yellow and black-striped fur as they padded silently toward the den, disappearing inside or standing guard outside. Padding to a stop on the edge of the clearing, Jeb caught a flash of Secka's gray fur disappearing into the shadows of the den, but he didn't see any sign of his parents or any of the other outlaws around him.

Shivers raced down his spine and he rapidly bunched his muscles to leap forward, hoping hiding behind a rocky wall would be safer than standing out in the open. He took a deep breath and leapt toward the den, but before his paws landed safely on the ground, something snagged his tail with sharp claws and yanked him back, making him slam against the hard ground. Tears of pain pricked Jeb's eyes and a jolt of terror overwhelmed him, but a rough paw clamped over his mouth before he could let out a scream.

Behind him, Zerone let out a low growl. "Keruni, go inside and wait for the others to arrive. I would like to have a little chat with Jeben first."

A moment of silence followed his words, but after a few minutes, Keruni cautiously stepped past him and bounded toward the rocky den, casting uncertain glances back at Jeb. Watching her disappear into the shadows of the den, Jeb remained frozen on the ground, his eyes still wide

with terror and his heart pounding frantically in his chest. His legs felt too weak with fear to move after Zerone had snagged his tail.

“Get up,” Zerone muttered with a weary sigh. “It wasn’t a creature, Jeben.”

Jeb blinked and tried to turn, but his whole body felt frozen in terror, as if the sudden shock had turned him to stone. His claws dug fearfully into the ground and he felt a shiver of fear race up his spine when Zerone let go of his tail and crept closer to him.

“Jeb?” A tiny hint of alarm tinged the Emperor’s voice. “Come on, get up. You haven’t died, have you? It was only me.”

Feeling a sharp wave of cold wash over him, Jeb took a shaky breath and tried to calm the wild beating of his heart. A sense of dizziness washed over him and his paws trembled violently with fear, but after a moment of hesitation, he forced himself to look back at the Emperor and stagger unsteadily to his paws. Sitting back against the freezing ground, he wrapped his tail tightly around his paws and shrank down, looking up at him with wide, terrified eyes and trembling in the freezing air of the night.

Zerone narrowed his eyes uncertainly. “Are you quite all right?”

Feeling his chest burn with the desire to yell at him for terrifying him but still feeling weak and dizzy with fear, Jeb simply nodded and stared down at his paws.

Zerone let out a long, tired sigh, his eyes lowering to the ground and suddenly darkening with weariness. “It was only me, Jeb. You didn’t need to overreact.”

A rush of anger and indignation shot through Jeb, but he didn’t say a word. His blue and green eyes stared unblinkingly up at Zerone’s tired face.

The Emperor let out another soft sigh and met his gaze. “Jeb, we need to talk.”

Disbelief shot through him. Why did Zerone want to ‘talk’ in the middle of the night outside a den they were set to destroy with creatures hiding in the woods around them? Trying to shake off his disbelief, he took a shaky breath. “What about?”

Zerone studied him closely. “I want you to keep your nose out of the past, Jeben. I have enough to deal with because of the creatures without you snooping around in such a dangerous area. If it’s an apology you want, then fine. I apologize for framing you and sending you to that horrid place.

However, I still can't allow you to come back to my Court. My deepest apologies, Jeb. If there's anything you want that will keep you from bothering me and Keruni, I will grant it, except, of course, readmission into my Court."

Jeb hesitated for a long moment then narrowed his eyes. "I don't want to go back to your Court!" A lie. After a long silence, he cautiously met the Emperor's eyes. "All right, Zerone, if it's a deal you want...Give me a *truthful* explanation of what really happened and I won't have to bother anybody by trying to find out myself."

Zerone narrowed his eyes. "*That* is the other thing I can't give you. Sorry, Jeb, but I'm not going to fill in the incriminating blanks for you." Taking a step closer, he towered over Jeb with a cold, threatening glint in his eyes. "I'm warning you now, Jeb, bother Keruni about those awful events again and you will wish you had never met me."

Jeb shivered and shrank back against the ground, trying to avoid his cold glare. "Zerone...what's got you so mad about this? Other than the obvious..."

"I'll say it one more time, Jeb." Zerone lashed his tail and gritted his teeth. "Leave Keruni alone. She means everything to me."

Jeb trembled and narrowed his eyes. Before he could think, he frowned and muttered under his breath. "It sure didn't seem like it when Carita was around."

Zerone stiffened instantly, his gray and green eyes widening in shock and then narrowing and gleaming with fury. Rage blazed in his shadowed eyes and his claws sunk deep into the earth. He gritted his teeth and a low snarl rumbled in his throat while Jeb faced him in alarm. "That was...a long time ago," Zerone growled in a voice Jeb could barely hear. "Was that what you were talking to Keruni about?"

Jeb hesitated for a long moment, feeling a shiver of unease. "Y-yes," he stammered, digging his claws into the ground to calm himself down. "Don't worry," he added in a scornful mutter. "She claims she can't remember a thing."

"Yes, well." Zerone pulled away from him with a curt tone of voice. "Keruni has a way of forgetting things she doesn't care to recall." He narrowed his eyes and glared at him. "This conversation is over. Remember what I said, Jeben. Now get to work." Without another word, the Emperor

whirled around and stalked off toward the den, muttering under his breath and leaving Jeb behind on the edge of the clearing.

Jeb stared after him with eyes wide with shock and bewilderment. Blinking several times, he looked up at the towering den and shivered. Even from a distance, he could see the excitement and malice glimmering in the eyes of the outlaws and Zerone's citizens. Soft, eager hisses whispered across the clearing in the chilly night air, sending shivers down Jeb's spine. A loud crash sounded somewhere inside the den, followed by muted cheers that made Jeb wince. Pausing just a few feet away from the enormous den, he stared up at the rocky ridges and felt a tiny tingle of worry and realization. This was just the beginning of the things they would do to the creatures. Soon it would get worse.

A sharp pang of guilt made him wince with sympathy for the creatures, but he tried to push it away. Lingered with the guilt in the back of his mind were terrifying memories of how Zerone had threatened him and confusion over the things the Emperor had said. In the chilly air of the dark clearing, things seemed awful, but Jeb couldn't help but wonder just how much worse it might get in the future. With a heavy sigh, he pushed the thoughts away and sat back as the destruction began, feeling a strange sense of sickness make his stomach turn at the sight.



# Chapter Ten

## Anxiety

“We have a problem.”

Saderia and Dash looked up from the rocky table at the sound of the soft, hesitant voice. Beside them, Karenisha and Makero turned to face the entrance of the den, letting their food drop onto the table. Cia and Uncle Jash stood in the entrance to the den outlined by the unnatural woods behind them. A pale, distraught expression shone on their faces, draining away any warmth or happiness in their blue eyes.

“We have a problem,” Cia repeated. “A...a big problem. The forest won’t be happy to hear this at all.”

All eyes stared at them unblinkingly, as if they were silently bracing themselves.

Karenisha narrowed her eyes and frowned uncertainly. “What is it, Cia?”

“The warehouse...” Cia trailed off nervously, turning helplessly to Uncle Jash.

He glanced at her with uneasy blue eyes before taking a deep breath and reluctantly turning to face the others. “Everything’s...destroyed. Everything’s in pieces. Not one single thing that we’ve been working on has been left untouched. None of it is useable anymore. It’s just a bunch of shredded pieces. I don’t even know if we can use what’s left as raw materials to start again...”

Saderia gaped at them in shock. Her food dropped out of her paws and her heart burned with incredulity and disbelief, as if she could barely comprehend the news that had been thrown at them. The shock and dismay she felt was mirrored almost exactly in the stunned faces of Karenisha, Makero, and Dash.

“What?” Karenisha leapt to her paws and stared at them in horror. “How could...but how...” She shook her head desperately. “Why?”

Makero gaped at them in disbelief. “Everything was destroyed?”

“Everything,” Cia whispered. “Broken, ripped...Nothing is left.”

Dash stared at them in shock. “But how could everything just... break or rip?”

Karenisha’s eyes grew dark. “It can’t be a coincidence.”

Saderia’s eyes widened. “You...you think someone did this on purpose?”

“I do.” Cia narrowed her eyes. “None of you saw it. Everything was ripped...as if by claws...and broken. Nothing could have done that unless it was intentional.”

Saderia gaped at them in dismay, her heart beginning to pound rapidly. “But...but some sort of disaster could have...”

“We saw no sign of any disaster,” Uncle Jash muttered, looking darkly down at his paws. “It was deliberate, Saderia, at least from what we could tell.”

Her eyes widened in horror. “But why...who would do that?”

“I don’t know,” Makero murmured, letting out a long sigh. “...But someone did...Someone wants to sabotage us.”

Silence spread throughout the den, cloaking the room in a cloud of tension. The six of them exchanged dark, uneasy glances and cast suspicious looks toward the entrance of the den. Memories of the strange paw prints and the severed wire burned in Saderia’s mind and a cold sense of dread seeped into her heart. She wanted to tell her parents about what she had found, but she bit her tongue at the sight of their dark, dismayed expressions and kept her suspicions to herself. The word *sabotage* seemed to ring in her ears and poison her mind. Was someone out to hurt the King and Queen?

“Was there any evidence?” Dash demanded, breaking the silence. “Anything to tell us who might have done it?”

“No,” Cia whispered, looking tortured. “We looked as hard as we could.”

The comfort and ease that had lit up the King and Queen’s faces during breakfast seemed to have been swept away by a passing breeze. Stress and dismay darkened their amber and green eyes as they glared down at the floor. Huddled in the entrance to the den, her aunt and uncle stared worriedly and miserably at the ground.

A barrage of images whirled through Saderia's mind like a movie reel. She could imagine a wide clearing filled with forest animals gazing up at them with hope and expectation glimmering in their eyes. Today was the day the King and Queen had planned to unveil all the new things Cia and Uncle Jash had created. The previous announcement had created a flurry of excitement and every forest animal had seemed to be waiting for this day. How could they tell them everything they had promised had been destroyed?

Grimness and despair clouded the eyes of her family members. She could practically see the same miserable visions swirling through the minds of Dash and the King and Queen as they imagined the forest's reaction. What would the animals do when they found out? Rebel? Distrust them? Lose faith in them or blame them, if not outright accuse them? The ideas made Saderia feel almost sick. Hopelessness hung in the air so thickly it was hard to breathe.

"Why?" Karenisha whispered. "Why does this always happen to us? Why does everything start looking so good only to get even worse than before?"

"Karenisha..." Makero muttered. "Not now. Not in front of..." He glanced over at Saderia and Dash, then quickly averted his gaze.

Karenisha whirled around and paced restlessly across the room. Makero's eyes followed her back and forth, while Cia and Uncle Jash avoided the eyes of everyone, as if they were afraid they would be blamed for delivering the bad news. Saderia's amber eyes were locked on her mother, absently tracing her steps across the room. Dash stared dully out at the woods beyond their home, his eyes clouded and dark, but also narrowed and focused, as if he was seeing something only he could see.

"What are we going to do?" Karenisha muttered, her fluffy tail dragging against the floor. "Oh, what are we going to do? Why us? I didn't ask for this job."

Saderia stared at the Queen in dismay, feeling horribly numb. Was her mother starting to break? Was there nothing she could do?

Makero closed his eyes and shook his head back and forth, desperately searching for a solution. "Maybe we could...no, but we... we could say..."

“It’s hopeless,” Karenisha muttered, her eyes wide with distress. “Once they realize we have nothing to give them, that we broke our promise, they’re all going to turn on us! No matter what we say. All we’ve done is going to fall apart! How are the animals going to be able to trust us after something like this?”

Makero let out a fearful growl. “How are we supposed to take care of them when they stop trusting us?”

Karenisha shook her head. “If we just had a clue! We...we could go there to check it out now and search for evidence before we go to the meeting...”

“But if we’re late to the meeting, it’ll look even more suspicious and they’ll be even angrier,” Makero argued. “Especially if we don’t find any evidence.”

Karenisha hissed furiously, her amber eyes blazing. “*Who* is sabotaging us?! If we just had one clue, if we could at least assure the animals that we were on top of the situation...But we don’t even have one lead!” She turned desperately to Cia and Uncle Jash, her eyes pleading for them to say she was wrong, that there was at least one thing that could give them some idea of who did it.

Cia bit her lip and looked down, unable to meet her sister’s hopeful gaze. “There was nothing, Karenisha, nothing incriminating at all.”

Karenisha squeezed her eyes shut and groaned. “What are we going to do? And who did this? Are we all going to destroy each other now? Is that where the kingdom is headed?” She shook her head several times. “Oh, what are we going to do?”

Blinking rapidly, as if coming out of a trance, Dash slowly turned around to face the Queen. Saderia stared at him as he watched her shake her head and bargain with herself back and forth. A dull sense of resignation darkened his amber eyes and when he finally dared to speak, his words were so soft Saderia could barely hear them.

“Blame me.”

The Queen whipped around to stare at him in shock. “What?”

“Blame me,” Dash repeated softly. “Tell the forest I did it.”

Everyone stopped and turned to stare at him in shock, as if noticing him for the first time. Saderia blinked and watched him in amazement, unable to find her voice.

“Dash...” Karenisha stammered, taken aback. “I can’t do that...”

He narrowed his eyes. “Why not? If you have someone to blame, the forest will continue to trust you. If they trust you, you can still help them.”

“But...”

“Dash,” Makero interrupted, his voice tense. “You didn’t *really* do it, did you?”

Dash blinked at him in surprise. “Of course not!” He paused, then murmured, “But you should tell them I did.”

Karenisha shook her head repeatedly back and forth. “No...no, we can’t do that.” She trailed off uncertainly and when Saderia turned to look at her, she could see the temptation burning behind her mother’s desperate gaze. Feeling sick, she swallowed back a protest of her own and turned to stare at Dash in incredulity.

“Karenisha’s right,” Makero emphasized. “We can’t do that, Dash.”

He frowned in a challenge. “Why not?”

Karenisha bristled. “It isn’t right to blame an innocent animal!”

Dash flicked his tail in annoyance and narrowed his eyes. “They’re just going to blame me anyway and you know it. Just make it easier on yourself.”

“No,” Makero growled. “We won’t let anyone blame you, Dash.”

“You’re just making it harder on yourselves,” he argued, lashing his tail. “You’re making it harder on the forest. They need to be able to trust you.”

“And what about you?” Karenisha demanded. “What would happen to you?”

He shrugged. “Whatever you want. You’re the King and Queen—you can decide my fate. It doesn’t matter anyway. The forest needs you more than they need me.”

“That’s not true,” Saderia whispered, feeling her words catch in her throat.

Dash looked back with a dark, disbelieving expression before whirling back around to face the King and Queen.

“We won’t allow anyone to blame you for this,” Makero said firmly. “We know you aren’t responsible in any way. Anyone can see that.”

“That’s not true,” Dash protested, narrowing his eyes. “They’re going to make their own assumptions no matter what you say. Come on, Karenisha, Makero, I’m the easiest to blame. What are you going to do if the forest turns on you?”

Karenisha sighed and looked away, the fire fading from her eyes. “I don’t know. But we’re not going to blame you. It’s not right.”

Dash flicked his dull gaze to the ground. “Maybe now isn’t the time for morals.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that,” she snapped. “I still refuse. End of discussion.”

Dash heaved a long, defeated sigh. “Fine. But it’s just going to hurt you even more if you try to defend me.”

“We’re not using our own son as our scapegoat,” Karenisha growled, gritting her teeth. “We’ll deal with the consequences ourselves. Besides, we’re still their King and Queen. We still have authority over them even if it isn’t well-liked.”

Cia bit her lip and tentatively looked up to face them. “They’ll be waiting.” Karenisha looked up sharply, then took a deep breath and let her panic fade. “All right. Makero, you come with me to the meeting. Cia, Jash, you’ll come, too. Saderia…”

“I’ll come,” Saderia murmured, avoiding her mother’s determined amber gaze.

Dash watched her carefully, his eyes narrowed and dark. “And me?”

The Queen narrowed her eyes, but Dash determinedly met her disapproving stare. “You’re not going to keep me from the meeting, too.”

“He’s right, that’ll look worse,” Makero murmured. “We’re a family, we’ll present ourselves as one. Now let’s get this over with. The forest animals are waiting for us in the meeting place and it will just make it worse if we make them wait.”

Karenisha took a deep breath. “All right. Everyone, let’s get moving. Saderia, Dash, don’t say a word at the meeting unless I say its okay.” Narrowing her eyes, she turned toward the entrance of the den and tensely padded away, flicking her tail in indication for them to follow. She gave the slightest shake of her head as she padded away. Saderia heard her mutter, “What has happened to our forest?”

Feeling numb, Saderia felt herself rise to her paws to follow her. She moved listlessly toward the entrance, letting her fur brush against Dash's when the dark lion rose and fell into step beside her. Makero hurried past them, his expression dark and his green eyes clouded in thought. At the entrance to the den, Karenisha pushed past Cia and Uncle Jash, ignoring their attempts to avoid her dull gaze. Without a word, they slowly crept after her and headed to the meeting place.

Dread rose in Saderia's chest with every step she took. The bright woods outside their home bloomed with colors and life and the sun shimmered down on them from a cloudless, baby blue sky. It was as if the entire forest was mocking their hopelessness for no reason but to emphasize their latest failure. Dewy flowers in every color of the rainbow blossomed out from their grassy bed, soaking in the sunlight. The green, orange, and purple leaves of the closest trees gleamed in the light. Even the vines hung loosely around the strong trunks of the trees, fanning out to welcome them. The woods seemed perfect and beautiful, but staring out at the gleaming colors inside the forest, Saderia only felt sick. She didn't see the bright hues or the welcoming draw of the forest. All she could see was a hiding place. Something or someone was hidden deep inside the magical woods, waiting for the next chance to sabotage them.

Staying close to Dash, she followed her parents and aunt and uncle into the sinister woods. The grass was warm, but when her paws brushed the stiff stalks, they sent a shiver of cold down her spine. The warm, honey-colored beam of sunlight shining on her back felt like a spike of ice piercing through her fur.

Taking a deep breath, Saderia tried to shake off the dread and looked up at her parents. Their tails dragged across the ground, leaving trails through the grass. Lowering her eyes, she spared a glance at Dash and saw the dull, clouded look in his eyes. He stared off at some invisible image, not looking at them. She watched him for a long moment.

"Why did you do that?" she finally whispered.

Dash blinked out of his thoughts and glanced over at her, then shrugged and looked away. "Like I said, it would have made it easier on them."

She blinked in confusion. "But...but why would the animals blame you anyway?"

Dash glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, his amber irises gleaming with disbelief, before he averted his gaze. "Never mind, Saderia. It doesn't matter."

She narrowed her eyes. "Tell me!"

"Just worry about the meeting," he shot back, flicking his tail. "It's not important anyway. Let me deal with my own problems."

Saderia watched him for a long moment before letting out a sigh and turning to face forward. The forest blurred around her as she followed her family and she kept her gaze locked on the ground. Branches brushed past her fur and the grass tickled her paws, but she barely noticed. She only bothered to look up when Dash gave her a soft flick of his tail. Tearing her eyes off the ground, she looked up just in time to see the woods open up in front of her into a wide, grassy clearing.

Loud cheers and the deafening roar of conversation boomed from the clearing. Splotches of bright orange, white, creamy yellow, tawny brown, black, and every shade in between dotted the clearing like a giant, colorful quilt. Every animal had gathered in the wide meeting place, awaiting their promised gifts. Saderia padded numbly past the crowd, surrounded by her family. Eager, excited eyes burned into her fur from every direction as she moved around the animals and took her place at the front of the meeting.

Colorful trees rose up around them, crowding them in. Leafy branches hung over the four fallen trees that served as a stage for them to stand on and address the animals. Bushes and greenery grew wild around the clearing, making it look almost like the meeting place back at her old home, but when she looked through the trees on the left, she could just make out the brown sand of the desert. Wincing, she turned away, remembering with a flash of pain how she had told the forest animals about her journey through the desert with Dingo when she had first arrived with Makero. The meeting had been just like this at the return of the lost Princess and Prince, but by the time she had finished her sad story, the joy had gone and the clearing had been cloaked in sorrow. She was beginning to think this one would end the same way.

A dark storm cloud seemed to hang over the royal family as they took their places on the stage of fallen trees. Almost instantly, the animals quieted and stared expectantly up at the King and Queen. Karenisha and



Makero stared grimly back at them without a word. After a long moment, Karenisha took a deep breath and slowly stepped forward to deliver the news. The eyes of the forest animals followed her, boring into her fur.

“Where’s our stuff?” someone shouted, his voice tainted with impatience.

Karenisha closed her eyes, then opened them with a tinge of calmness and resignation. “I’m afraid there is nothing we can give you.” At once, cries of disbelief and dismay rang out around the clearing, but Karenisha went on in a strong, steady voice. “I am very sorry for having to disappoint you all. We had anticipated giving you the things we’ve been working on today, but I’m afraid you will have to wait a bit longer.”

Shock and outrage spread through the crowd like wildfire.

“What?” someone shouted. “What is the meaning of this?”

“What is this, a sick joke? You get our hopes up and then give us nothing?”

“Why can’t we have it now? What happened? How long until we *do* get it? How—” The animal broke off in a harsh fit of coughing. His questions were drowned in the roar of anger and dismay erupting from the crowd.

“I’m afraid,” Makero began, “that it will be a long time until you can get what you expected. I am sorry to say that there is nothing left that we can give you.”

Shock and confusion burned in the eyes of the animals and a wave of horror spread through the crowd. “How can that be?” someone yelled.

“Because someone destroyed it!” Cia snapped, stalking forward and giving the crowd a hostile look as if trying to spot the guilty party.

Karenisha let out a furious hiss and whipped around to glare at her. “*Cia!*”

A wave of outrage and suspicion surged viciously through the crowd. Cries and accusations flew wildly through the air, punctuated by raw fits of coughing.

“All right,” Karenisha roared, shouting to be heard over the voice of the crowd. “Yes, it seems that someone has destroyed everything that we made. That is why we cannot give it to you. I assure you that we are working hard to find the culprit. At the same time, we are making every effort to restore some of the items that were destroyed. I urge you all not to

visit the warehouse in case there is any remaining evidence. I feel sincerely responsible for the incident, but I promise to be more vigilant in the future and to solve this problem as soon as possible.”

The noise didn’t die away.

“Do you at least have evidence as to who might have done it?” someone cried.

The King and Queen exchanged a glance, then nodded quickly. “Yes, we have several leads, and we will make sure this doesn’t happen again,” Makero assured them.

“It’s not too hard to guess who did it,” someone muttered. Furious growls and snarls followed his words and every animal seemed to cast a cold, suspicious glance at Dash. The dark brown lion sighed and looked away from the angry faces and flattened his ears to drown out the cruel snarls.

“That’s enough,” Karenisha snapped, lashing her tail. “There is nothing we can do about it at the moment. You all will just have to go on with your daily lives. We’re doing the best we can to fix this and we will let you know if we get any farther in figuring out who has done this or when we will have new things ready.”

“Yeah right,” someone muttered. “This is a conspiracy.”

An animal near the front of the crowd choked back a cough and glared up at the King and Queen. “Yeah, why should we trust you? As the King and Queen, you probably have it great! Why should you care about any of us?”

“They aren’t fit to be King and Queen,” another growled.. “They’re either against us themselves or they’re not competent enough to rule the kingdom.”

Karenisha and Makero sat motionless as the animals started to stalk away from the clearing. Their expressions remained dark but unchanged as the animals hissed and spat at them on their way past. Muttering and snarling spread through the group of animals as they cast dangerous looks back at the royal family.

The animals snarled accusations at the King and Queen as well as their closest neighbors. Distrust and suspicion burned in the eyes of all the forest animals. They shoved roughly past one another and bared their fangs at anyone who pushed back. Saderia watched silently, her eyes narrowed

and resigned, as the forest animals stormed off into the woods. Tension and anger lingered in the thick air of the clearing. Slowly the mutters and snarls began to fade away as the animals stalked away from the clearing. Soon the only things left were the grim, unmoving forms of the royal family and a tense, dangerous silence.

Tension tainted the air throughout the entire week. Outside, the bright plants began to shrink back into the grass and the air grew crisp and chilly, as if the mood of the animals had infected the forest. Suspicious glares seemed to track her every move whenever she dared set foot in one of the neighborhoods to check on the animals. The cold stares were even worse when Dash was with her. Even after a week, they still suspected him. No matter where he went, the son of Dastarius couldn't go unchallenged. Saderia had long ago figured out that that was why they were all so quick to distrust him. He was the easiest to blame.

It didn't help that Karenisha and Makero were no closer to solving the mystery of the destroyed warehouse. The King and Queen hadn't had time to investigate yet. Disasters ravaged the forest, leaving them no choice but to visit the damaged neighborhoods where their help was anything but wanted. Cia and Uncle Jash were usually too busy helping them or making plans to build new supplies to investigate the old ones. Saderia and Dash were the only ones without work, but they had been confined to the den.

"We're going out again," Karenisha murmured on the seventh day before Saderia and Dash had even left their bedrooms to have breakfast. The King and Queen stood in front of the entrances to their rooms with dull eyes and a dark, clipped tone. "Cia and Jash already left an hour ago to plan how to make some of the new things. Stay here, and don't do anything dangerous while we're gone."

Saderia and Dash exchanged a glance, then nodded. The King and Queen simply drifted toward the entrance of the den without another word, like they had every day. The silence from the meeting seemed to have lingered as well. None of them said a word to each other anymore, too caught up in the stress of their thoughts to think of what to say.

The two of them moved toward the table once Karenisha and Makero had left, but they barely touched the food Karenisha had brought home last night. The silence of the house seemed to close in on them.

Thoughts of the destroyed warehouse haunted Saderia's mind, and a dark thought began to form when she remembered the severed wire. First the wire, now the warehouse. How could that be just a coincidence? If she went to investigate, would she find the same things she had found near the cut wire? Would there be more traces of sabotage?

"Dash..." she murmured.

He looked up at her and blinked. "Hmm?"

"Let's go to that warehouse..." she murmured, picking at her food. Narrowing her eyes, she looked up to meet his gaze with burning amber irises. "Let's do some investigating of our own."

He hesitated in uncertainty. "Karenisha and Makero don't want us to leave the house without permission."

She nonchalantly flicked her tail. "How will they know?"

He shrugged. "Touché. Still...why? What do we expect to find that Cia and Jash didn't when they investigated it the first time?"

She let out a soft breath. "I don't know, but I want to see it for myself. I want to see if there's any connection to the power outage."

Understanding dawned in his amber eyes. "Good idea. Cia and Jash usually round up a bunch of animals to help them build stuff. If we go now, I think we'll have about an hour or so before they get there."

Saderia's eyes gleamed. "All right, let's hurry then."

Jumping to her paws, she flicked her tail in indication for Dash to follow and rushed toward the entrance of the den. Chilly air blasted their faces the moment they stepped outside, but Saderia barely noticed. Diving into the woods, she raced past the drooping plants as fast as she could, weaving her way in and out of trees and plants. The stiff, frigid grass was flattened underneath her quick paws. Without having to think about it, she veered off onto the rough trail that led to the warehouse. Her paws fell into the prints that had been left by her aunt and uncle, and she let the trail of trampled grass lead the way. Weeds tugged at her paws, but she ripped past them in her haste to get there. After darting through the woods and following the long, winding path for what felt like ages, the woods in front of her finally gave way to a wide clearing.

A lone, rocky den towered at the back of the clearing, casting a dark shadow over the grass. The trees around the clearing were still and it

seemed almost peaceful. From the outside, it didn't seem as if the warehouse had been raided at all.

Exchanging a glance with Dash, she slowly stepped into the wide clearing and scanned the ground for any sign of strange paw prints. Frustration burned in her chest when the only tracks she found were those of her aunt and uncle and the ones who had helped them build the different items. No hint of the strange prints like the ones near the wire marred the ground.

Heaving a sigh, she crept toward the warehouse instead and peeked inside. She almost winced at the sight. Scraps of shredded cloth littered the rocky floor and broken fragments of pots and things had been left in pieces. The remains of some of the items they had created were left ragged and scarred by claws. Even the walls had been scored with claw marks.

Taking a deep breath, Saderia padded through the wreckage, searching for any clues as to who had done it. She examined some of the shredded cloth to try to see the type of claws that had made the marks, but it was all in strips with no hope of identification. On the other side of the warehouse, Dash was carefully studying the broken items for evidence. Hissing under her breath, Saderia called, "Have you found anything?"

"No," Dash called back, his ears flattening with disappointment. "You?"

"Nothing," she muttered with a heavy sigh. "I guess this was a wasted trip. Come on, let's just go home."

Letting out a soft sigh, Dash reluctantly abandoned the destroyed items and padded back toward her. Their tails drooped with disappointment as they stalked out of the warehouse. Saderia started to lead the way into the woods, then paused when Dash stopped and looked intently down at the ground.

"Saderia, look at this," he called when she glanced back.

Frowning, Saderia walked cautiously back to him, then froze and gasped when she followed his gaze. A faint, tiny hint of a paw print had been pressed into a patch of dirt. The small print was just like her own, but the toes were connected by a faint mark, just like the one she had found near the electricity wire. Her heart skipped a beat.

"What could have made a print like this?" Dash breathed.

Saderia shook her head and stared at the print. After what felt like ages, she finally tore her eyes away from it and looked up, then froze in place when her eyes locked on a low, nearby branch. A tiny tuft of fur had been snared on the branch, floating lightly in the wind. Her eyes widening, Saderia stepped toward it as if in a trance and gently hooked it with her claw to hold it up and examine it. Bright yellow fur with a black stripe lining the edge of it laid flat on her paw. She frowned in confusion. What kind of animal had fur like that? Lionesses had a creamy color and a few others were light-colored, but the fur in her paw was a vivid, unnatural yellow.

“Where could this have come from?” she whispered.

Hovering over her shoulder, Dash narrowed his eyes and shook his head. “I have no idea. But it wasn’t one of the forest animals. None of them have fur like this...”

“Then who does?” Saderia demanded, her wide, gleaming amber eyes boring into the eerie tuft of fur.

“I don’t know,” Dash murmured, his eyes darkening. “But whatever it is...this is not normal. Something’s out to get us.”

Saderia looked up with narrowed eyes. “I know. But who...or what? And why?”

Dash shook his head. “I can’t tell. But no matter what it is or why, we’re being sabotaged, and there’s nothing we can do about it with this little bit of evidence.”

Saderia stared out at the cold woods around her and felt her heart sink. She let the wind carry the fur out of her paw and took a deep, shaky breath. “I know,” she whispered. “Something is out there. And it’s watching our every move.”

# Chapter Eleven

## Undeserved Cruelty

Jeb laid against the cold, hard floor of his cave den, staring listlessly up at the craggy ceiling. His dull, bloodshot blue and green eyes bored into the shadowed rocks above him. Insomnia had kept him up every night for the past few days, making him feel weak with exhaustion and creating dark bags under his eyes. His eyelids drooped with weariness, but no matter how hard he tried to close his eyes and get to sleep, a sharp sense of guilt kept him wide awake.

*“If they turn on each other and destroy each other, it works just as well for us, right?”* Zerone’s cold words burned in his mind when he thought back to the meeting. Shivers of dread raced down his spine. Burying his face in his yellow paws, he tried to tell himself that he should hate the creatures for invading his forest, but a twinge of guilt lingered. He didn’t want the creatures dead, only gone. All he wanted was to be safe.

His mind whirled with memories of the sharp crashing sounds that had echoed throughout the creatures’ den and the malicious laughter of the kraguers as they destroyed everything in sight. What if the creatures really did destroy themselves because of what he had done? What if they died because of him? What if they weren’t truly evil the way they had believed? What if he was hurting innocent animals? He tried to push the thoughts away, but the sense of guilt still haunted the back of his mind. What if he was making a terrible mistake? A sick sense of dismay burned in his mind at the thought of the destruction he and the others had caused and the pain they might have created.

Pushing the thoughts away, he tried to fall asleep, but his hope for sleep was whisked away by a jolt of alarm. A dark memory of Zerone flickered into his mind, making his heart skip with anxiety. The threats the Emperor had thrown at him and Keruni’s strange mood and words floated through his mind, making his eyes narrow in wonder. Part of him longed to

ignore Zerone's threats to uncover what he was hiding, but he knew the Emperor was serious. Knowing the truth wasn't worth risking his life.

Heaving a sigh, he turned over and stared around at the shadowed, rocky walls of his tiny cave den. Lying across from him against the wall were his parents, both soundly asleep. In a few hours, both of them would be waking up and looking forward to a new meeting where they would devise new plans to get rid of the creatures. A jolt of guilt made Jeb wince. Why couldn't he just stay home and have no part in it?

Trying to push away his regret, he took a deep breath and pushed himself to his paws, knowing he would never be able to sleep. He cast one last, lingering glance at his parents before padding cautiously toward the entrance to the den. Poking his head around the corner, he peered out into the rest of the Spring. When he realized it was empty, he crept out of his den and padded soundlessly over to the empty basin carved into the center of the cavern. For a long moment, he stared down at the slimy, mold-covered basin and felt himself longing to be peering down at crystal-like waters instead.

Shaking it off, he took a deep, weary breath and leapt over the basin to stand in a beam of moonlight on the other side. Without giving himself time to think, he jumped upward and grabbed onto the side of the hole leading into the Spring, scrabbling at the side to pull himself over. His fur bristled with fear when he staggered to his paws in the cold woods above the Spring, but he tried not to let his heart beat faster with fear.

Keeping his ears pricked for any sound of movement, he padded silently across the thick grass and stopped a few feet away from the entrance to the Spring. Looking up at the bright, silvery moonlight shimmering down through the trees, he let out a soft sigh and slowly sank down onto the ground. Curling his tail tightly around his freezing paws, he laid his head down on the grass and stared at the shadowy bushes and trees rising up in front of him. His mind whirled with painful thoughts that he didn't bother to push away.

After laying there for what felt like ages, a sudden rustling sound made him freeze in alarm. Whirling around, he leapt to his paws and just barely suppressed a cry of fear when he saw a dense clump of bushes trembling behind him. His eyes widened in horror and he stood frozen to



the spot, unable to move or run back to the Spring. He jumped back and nearly let out a cry when an animal peeked out from behind the bushes.

His heart froze when the animal crept out of the bushes and turned to face him, her green eyes glimmering. Jeb gaped in shock and felt a rush of relief wash over him.

“K-Keruni?”

Keruni blinked and looked up at him with wide, distant green eyes. After a long moment of silence, she looked down at her paws. “Hi,” she mumbled.

Hi? Jeb stared at her in disbelief. “What are you doing here?”

Keruni slowly turned to look around. “This clearing is pretty,” she murmured.

Jeb blinked and stared at her in confusion. “What are you doing here?”

Keruni hesitated once again for what felt like ages. After a long moment of tense, awkward silence, she murmured, “I heard what Daddy said to you at that den thing we raided.” She paused, then stared uncomfortably at her paws. “Er...sorry about that. He gets kind of carried away when it comes to me and what happened in the fire. I don’t know what it is. He just...” She trailed off and nervously played with a sprig of grass.

Jeb stared at her for a long moment, his mind whirling with bafflement and disbelief. Had she actually come all the way to the Spring just to express embarrassment over her father’s overly protective attitude? Shaking his head, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “That’s, uh, okay, Keruni. Um...anything else you want to talk about?”

She looked up and met his eyes with a wide, distant gaze. “It wasn’t my fault.”

He frowned and narrowed his eyes in confusion. What was she talking about? “Um...*what* isn’t your fault?” he stammered, trying to play along.

Keruni’s eyes looked distant and dull. “It was an accident,” she choked out, her absent, clouded gaze gleaming with a tinge of distress. Blinking rapidly, she faced him with wide, miserable green eyes. “You have to understand! *Please!* I never wanted to hurt anybody! I wanted everyone to stay *unhurt!*”

Jeb stared at her with wide eyes, his heart beginning to beat faster with confusion and alarm. Trying to choke back the urge to scream at her for an explanation for her weird behavior, he took a deep breath. Keeping his voice steady even though his mind whirled with befuddlement, he murmured, "Has...has this been bothering you for a while?"

She nodded miserably, her eyes narrowing and clouding with pain. "Ever since this stuff about the past started. It was an accident."

"I...see..." He narrowed his eyes and studied her, trying to understand what she was talking about. "Well...do you want to talk about it? It might make you feel better."

To his disappointment, she shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut, her ears drooping with defeat. "No. I don't remember exactly. I just know it was very, very bad, and I felt so horrible...but Daddy said it wasn't my fault. I'm not sure..." She trailed off again and looked up with absent, clouded eyes that seemed to stare straight through him.

Jeb stared back at her with stunned eyes. Was she just being evasive or could she really not remember? His mind felt muddled with confusion, but when he stared at Keruni, a dark thought sliced through the befuddlement. What if this was a trick? What if she was hoping Zerone would find them and catch Jeb 'questioning' her again? A shiver raced down his spine and his fur began to bristle with fear. If Zerone caught him ignoring his threat, he would be done for. Knowing Keruni, she might just do it, as well.

Narrowing his eyes, he turned away from her and gazed at the entrance to the Spring. "Well, I'm sorry you're so upset, but my life isn't exactly great at the moment either and I should get back to my den. You should get back to your Daddy's Court, too."

Keruni watched him with sad green eyes. "I'd never want to admit it to you, Jeb, but sometimes I wish we were still friends."

A jolt of pain sliced through his heart and he instantly turned away. Ducking his head, he stormed toward the entrance of the Spring. "I have to go," he muttered, walking briskly toward the hole in the ground and flattening his ears in pain. Forcing himself not to look back, he leapt down into the hole, landing roughly on the rocky ground below. A freezing gust of wind followed him down, making his shiver with cold and sadness.

Keruni had always seemed a bit strange and he had always thought that she lived to mess with his mind. Nothing seemed to have changed.

Hours passed by as Jeb laid miserably on the floor of his cave den, shivering at the shadows whisking across the wall. His mind whirled with wonder and confusion when he thought back to his strange conversation with Keruni. A twinge of guilt made his heart beat faster with fear when he remembered how he had left her alone in the dark. What if the creatures had found her after he had gone? A violent shiver raced down his spine. Keruni was a pain, but the last thing he wanted was for her to get hurt.

The sound of paws scraping against stone broke through the silence of the den. Looking back, he jumped up in alarm when he saw two green eyes staring back at him and felt his heart skip in his chest. Landing shakily on his paws, he looked up to see Telku standing in front of him with an apologetic look on his face.

“Sorry, Jeb,” his father murmured. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Jeb let out a soft sigh and tried to relax, letting his fur lie flat along his back and allowing his sense of panic to fade away.

Against the opposite wall of the tiny den, Jati stretched and pulled herself to her paws. A bright grin spread across her face. “All right, time to go! More things to plan!”

Jeb blinked, then narrowed his eyes at her in a sudden rush of bitterness. “You seem rather happy to be planning with the Emperor...who you despise...”

Jati shrugged and sneered. “Hey, this is one thing he didn’t completely mess up! Besides, we’re as much in control as he is, so *ha!*” She snickered and flicked her tail excitedly back and forth. “Come on, let’s go see what to do next!” Leaping forward, she practically skipped out of the den, her flicking tail disappearing behind a wall of stone.

A rush of fury suddenly burned in Jeb’s chest, surprising him. How could he feel so mad at his own mother when she was only trying to help? Trying to push away the bitter thoughts, he wondered how the creatures might have felt once they discovered the kraguers’ destruction and winced with guilt. Shaking his head, he tried to push the thoughts away. The creatures were the enemies, not the other way around. Still...

Jeb looked nervously down at his paws before cautiously meeting Telku's distracted gaze. "Dad? Um...maybe we shouldn't do this."

Telku blinked and turned to him in surprise. "What do you mean? Why not?"

Jeb shifted uncomfortably. "Well...they haven't really done anything to us, have they? This just seems kind of...cruel. Maybe they don't deserve it like we think they do."

Telku narrowed his eyes. "Jeben, those creatures...they're like nothing we've ever seen before. We don't know why they're here or where they came from... It might seem a bit harsh, but it's what we have to do to reclaim our forest."

"Reclaim?" Jeb looked up in surprise. "They didn't technically *take* it from us—they don't even know we exist! How do we even know they're dangerous?"

Telku blinked, then narrowed his eyes, his green irises clouding in thought. After a moment of hesitation, he opened his mouth to speak, but Jati's voice cut across him.

"You're naïve, Jeben. Those things are freaks of nature." She poked her head inside and narrowed her eyes. "Don't always think the best of everyone—they could be evil. They're *usually* evil. In fact, we pretty much *know* those creatures would hurt us."

Jeb blinked, then narrowed his eyes uneasily. "How? How do we know?"

She frowned and raised an eyebrow. "I can't believe *you're* asking me this, Jeb. You, of all kraguers, should be scared stiff at just the mention of those creatures!"

Jeb winced and looked bitterly down at his paws, his fur burning with humiliation.

"Jati!" Telku snapped.

"Well, sorry, but he should know those things are nothing but trouble," Jati hissed back with an exaggerated roll of her eyes. "They deserve whatever we give them. Let's just forget this and get going." Casting one final glance at Telku and Jeb through narrowed eyes, Jati pulled away from the entrance and disappeared out of sight.

Telku sighed and rested his tail on Jeb's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Jeb, but you know how your mother is. She hardly knows what she's talking

about. She's...impulsive."

Jeb winced and kept his gaze trained on his paws. "Dad, I don't want to go. I don't want anyone to get hurt, creature or kraguer."

Telku frowned and glanced thoughtfully at the entrance to the den. "Well...I suppose you don't have to go. Your mother won't be happy, but if you truly don't want to go, you can wait here until we get back."

Jeb looked up at the shadowed, damp cave and narrowed his eyes, feeling a shiver of dread. The last thing he wanted to do was stay behind, alone in the underground Spring that was filled with other vile criminals that might not go to the meeting. Suddenly, going to the meeting didn't seem so bad. At the same time, he felt a sharp pang of guilt and disgust at himself. Why was he helping the two animals that *had* hurt him destroy the animals that hadn't done a thing to him or anyone else? Zerone and his daughter had destroyed three lives in a matter of days...Why was he helping them destroy even more?

Trying to shake off the guilty thoughts, he glanced around and felt another tremble of terror. Remembering the sharp claws he had imagined, he forced himself to believe his mother was right. If the creatures looked that terrifying, they had to be nothing but trouble...right?

Taking a deep, shaky breath, he looked up at his father with narrowed, frightened blue and green eyes. "Actually...Maybe I *could* go..." He hesitated for a long moment, then added more quietly, "Do you think Keruni will be there?"

Telku frowned. "Probably. Zerone usually brings her along to look out for her."

"Then I'll go with you," he said quickly, pushing away guilty thoughts. Turning away from his father, he padded swiftly toward the entrance, then paused when Telku rested his tail on his shoulder to stop him. He blinked up at him in surprise. "What?"

Telku let out a soft sigh. "You miss her, don't you?"

Jeb felt his fur prickle in embarrassment and he rapidly looked away. "No." Turning away from his father, he stalked uncomfortably out into the main part of the Spring, feeling his fur prickling with every step. Trying to shake off a twinge of pain and embarrassment, he looked up to see his mother standing near the entrance. Around the Spring, outlaws were creeping out of their dens and gathering around the empty basin.

Jati pricked her ears at the sound of his paw steps and grinned when she turned around to see him. "Good, you're coming with us." She flicked her tail toward the basin and the strip of rock beyond it. "Go on, wait over there. I'll get your father."

Jeb stumbled forward when she gave him a shove and flattened his ears. Trying not to let his fur bristle with discomfort, he took a deep breath and shakily padded toward the empty basin. He paused on the edge of the dip in the ground, then bunched his muscles and leapt over the slimy basin to reach the other side. Stumbling forward across the rocky ground, he shrank down against the ground and moved to huddle against the wall, close to a beam of moonlight shining down from the hole in the ceiling. Crouching close to the ground, he tried to avoid getting too close to the crowd of outlaws gathered on the tiny strip of land, but he looked up when he spotted gray fur close beside him.

Secka stood just a few inches away from the stream of moonlight. He stared intently up at the upper world with a slight sneer, looking oddly pleased. His gray eyes remained locked on the sprigs of grass, but after a moment, he caught Jeb watching him. Narrowing his eyes, he glanced down and glared at Jeb with a bored look in his eyes.

"What are you staring at?"

Jeb gulped nervously. "Er...nothing." He hesitated, then looked back up to meet the gray kraguer's gaze. "Um...so what do you think will happen?"

Secka narrowed his eyes, then looked away and shrugged. "Who knows? So long as we take care of those creatures." His eyes twinkled. "Isn't that the important thing?"

Jeb frowned uncertainly. "Maybe they don't deserve it..." He blinked, then looked up sharply, feeling a jolt of alarm when he realized what he had said. It was one thing to say something like that to his parents, but to one of the outlaws?

Secka glanced back at him with raised eyebrows. "Really? Why do you say that?"

Jeb hesitated, feeling a twinge of uncertainty about revealing his thoughts to one of the criminals even if it was just Secka. After a long moment, he glanced around and shrugged uncomfortably. "Well...they didn't exactly do anything to us, did they?"

Secka shrugged. "It's only a matter of time before they do. We should really eliminate them before they *do* give us any problems." His eyes twinkled and a sneer spread across his face. "Them and anyone else who might be a problem."

A jolt of shock raced through Jeb's body. He stared up at Secka with stunned blue and green eyes. "Eliminate them? I thought we were only trying to drive them out!"

The gray outlaw narrowed his eyes condescendingly. "Oh, come on, don't be so naïve, Jeb. You really think the others are going to settle for just driving them out?"

Jeb's eyes widened in horror. "You're going to kill them?"

"Hey, not my idea." Secka shrugged apathetically. "What's it matter anyway?"

Jeb stared up at him in shock, feeling his heart beat faster. A wave of guilt washed over him, making him shrink back against the wall. How many kraguers would be hurt trying to accomplish their sick mission? How many creatures would actually *die* as a result of it? A tremble of terror racked his body and he tried to suppress a whimper. Why was any of this necessary? Why couldn't they just leave each other alone?

"Is everybody ready?"

Jati's voice cut through his thoughts, making him look up with a jolt to see her and Telku racing toward them. His parents leapt over the basin and skidded to a halt in front of the outlaws. Glancing around at the crowd of criminals, Jati grinned and flicked her tail. "Good. Let's get to that meeting."

Jeb flattened his ears and looked away, trying to hide the guilt in his eyes. Trying not to think about the creatures, he couldn't help but remember his conversation with Keruni. Feeling a twinge of regret, he couldn't help but wonder if she had simply been messing with him before or if she had truly meant what she had said. More than anything, he wondered if she had made it back to her father's Court unharmed.

The wide clearing surrounding the sparkling Sight Pond spread out in front of Jeb. The trees that had surrounded him gave way to the huge, open expanse of land. A tiny stream of moonlight shone down from the pitch black sky, dusting the Sight Pond with a crystal-like, shining glow and

lighting up the stiff grass. Several kraguers sat in front of him in the center of the clearing, watching him with narrowed eyes. Trying to shake off a shiver of nervousness at being out in the open, Jeb followed his parents toward the center of the clearing. Secka stepped out from behind him and led the way until they stopped and sat back in front of Zerone and his kraguers. The three outlaws behind them paused and narrowed their eyes at the Emperor.

Curling his tail tightly around his paws and trying not to shiver with fear, Jeb couldn't help but let his gaze flick to the tiny, green-eyed kraguer sitting close beside Zerone. Keruni's eyes were narrowed and hostile, and her expression seemed as cocky and condescending as ever. Only a tiny hint of fear darkened her bright eyes. She barely spared a glance at him when he stepped forward to stand beside Secka and his parents. Her prim, arrogant expression made it seem as if their meeting had never happened at all.

A tingle of sadness crept over him. Keruni hadn't changed and she hadn't meant any of the things she had said. All her words had been a trick. She never had and never would care about him enough to like him as a friend rather than a source of entertainment.

Zerone glanced at the outlaws through narrowed eyes. "I see you've all made it."

Secka looked up at him and raised an eyebrow. "Sorry to disappoint you."

The Emperor rolled his eyes. "Have you found out anything about the creatures?"

Telku heaved a sigh and shook his head. "Not really. We've been trying to keep out of the upper world after we destroyed everything in that den."

Zerone nodded slowly. "We've been trying to do the same. Nonetheless, it seems like destroying their stuff wasn't enough. We have to come up with something else to hurt them and drive them out."

Jeb looked up at him with wide eyes at the sound of his cold words and felt a shiver of dread slip down his spine. A tingle of guilt burned in his chest when he thought about the creatures. His mind whirled with sudden pain and unease at the Emperor's dark voice. *Hurt* them? Weren't they only trying to drive them out?



Secka frowned thoughtfully. “So far we’ve only been taking away things they want, like the light and the things in the den. What if we take away things they *need*?”

Zerone frowned and narrowed his eyes in wonder. “That seems like a good idea. But what...” His gray and green eyes suddenly lit up in understanding. “The food.”

Secka nodded slowly. “We could try taking that away from them. It would make them desperate to leave after a few weeks have gone by.”

Zerone hesitated, then sneered. “That’s a brilliant idea, actually. I’m glad I came up with it.” Flicking his tail, he glanced coolly around at the outlaws. “I say the best way to sabotage the creatures is to start taking the fruit off the trees so they can no longer have it. When their food supply starts to run out, I doubt they’ll be too keen to stay here.”

Jeb blinked in shock, feeling a sudden rush of dismay wash over him. Taking away their light and the things in the den was one thing, but their *food*? A sudden wave of fear and alarm made him feel light-headed. Images of the strong, eerie creatures fading into nothing but frail, miserable animals suddenly flashed through his mind, making his heart ache with guilt and shock. Zerone wasn’t planning on *starving* them, was he?

Secka sat back calmly and gave Zerone a slight nod, his gray eyes dull with the usual sense of boredom and apathy. “As their food supply dwindles, they’ll get weaker and weaker and more miserable. Once it runs out completely, they’ll have no choice but to leave the forest in search of other food or stay here to wither away.”

Zerone’s eyes glinted. “Exactly.”

One of his kraguers looked up with wide eyes. “But how do we do it? How could we take their food without them knowing?”

Zerone frowned, but before he could speak, Secka calmly flicked his tail.

“That’s easy,” the gray outlaw murmured. “Every night, we’ll sneak out and steal some of the food right off of the trees. We’re small enough and sneaky enough that they hopefully won’t notice us. We’ll take the food slowly instead of trying to get rid of it all at once. If we gradually take pieces of fruit off the trees, eventually it will all be gone and the creatures won’t suspect a thing. All they will think is that nothing is growing well.

We'll keep going there every night to make sure nothing grows back, as well."

Jeb stared up at him with wide eyes, feeling his heart begin to beat faster. His claws kneaded deep into the ground and his legs began to tremble with fear and unease. He gulped nervously, trying to swallow back a wave of sickness at the thought of the suffering creatures. As far as he knew, the fruit was the only source of food the creatures had. How could they survive if their only source of food was taken away forever?

Zerone nodded slowly. "That's what I was thinking. If we gradually take the fruit, they won't suspect a thing. Once it's all gone, they'll starve. In the meantime, they'll get weaker and weaker until they're barely a threat. Their only hope for survival will be to leave the forest. They'll also probably start fighting over any scraps of food and destroy each other without our help. I'm sure once all the food is gone, they'll be reluctant to leave, but after the first creature dies, they're sure to make up their mind."

Die? Jeb's eyes grew wide with horror. They were planning on *killing* the creatures by slowly starving them to death? A wave of sickness made him feel suddenly ill and he wavered on his paws. Thoughts of weak, gaunt creatures collapsing in their dens suddenly swirled through his mind, making his heart beat faster with dismay. Guilt and horror rose in his chest, making him feel light-headed. This was too far...

Looking around wildly, he searched for any sign that the kraguers realized how cruel this was. His heart sank with dismay when he realized Zerone's gray and green eyes were calm and determined, Keruni's bright green irises were oblivious and unbothered, and Secka's ashy gray eyes seemed as apathetic as ever. Only Telku seemed a bit uncomfortable, shifting nervously back and forth and narrowing his eyes in uncertainty. Telku didn't say a word, as if afraid to protest. Jeb's mind whirled with guilt and he longed to say something, but didn't know what. Looking around wildly, he opened his mouth, then paused when Zerone stepped to his paws and gazed around at all the kraguers.

"I say we start tonight," the Emperor growled, smiling a determined smile. "Let's get going and take as much of the fruit as we can now!"

Cheers of determination rang out among the kraguers, while Jeb's eyes widened in horror. The outlaws and Zerone's kraguers leapt to their paws in excitement, making a wave of dismay wash over him. Zerone

whirled around to face the woods on the edge of the clearing and stepped forward to lead the way. The other kraguers crowded close around the Emperor, herding Jeb along with them and dragging him into their plans. Staggering forward, Jeb looked up in horror and let out a desperate cry. "Wait!"

The kraguers around him paused, and their cheers slowly died away. Narrowing their eyes in confusion and surprise, they slowly turned around to face him. Jeb stood shakily behind them, facing them with wide, desperate blue and green eyes.

"This is going too far!" he choked out. "We're trying to drive them out, not *kill* them! It's just cruel to do this to them!" The instant the words slipped out, he clapped a paw over his mouth and stared at the kraguers in horror, his heart beating wildly with fear when he realized he had spoken out loud. A wave of alarm washed over him when he found himself under the intense stares of everyone in the clearing.

To his surprise, none of the kraguers glared at him or protested at his words. Their eyes bored into him, but instead of anger, their colorful irises were tinged with a tiny hint of fear and desperation. The terrified, nervous faces of the kraguers stared back at him, and even the outlaws seemed weaker and less fearsome than before. Hidden behind the fear in their guarded eyes was a barely noticeable gleam of relief.

"You're a fool." Secka's soft, cold voice suddenly broke the intense silence of the clearing. Pushing his way through the crowd of nervous kraguers, he stood in front of Jeb and narrowed his eyes. "You're too soft. If the rest of us thought like you, we would all have been forced to leave this forest a long time ago."

Panic burned in the eyes of the kraguers. Gritting their teeth to hide the intense gleam of fear and alarm in their eyes, they glared at Jeb. Hisses of fury and disgust rippled through the crowd of kraguers, making Jeb's heart sink and his eyes widen with fear. Several of them stalked forward and shoved at him, making him sway with terror.

Telku let out a snarl of fury when one of the outlaws spat at him and struggled to push his way through the crowd. "Get away from him!" he hissed. "He's right! This is too far!" Protests rang out. Kraguers hissed at Telku, but Telku forced his way forward and let out a hiss. "This will just make the creatures madder! There's nothing to gain from it!"

“Apparently, you’re the only one who thinks so, Telku.” Secka narrowed his eyes at him while the other kraguers paused uncertainly. The outlaw’s ashen gray eyes glinted in the dim light. “There’s everything to gain from it. Our forest, for one thing.”

Mixed amounts of fear and determination suddenly gleamed in the eyes of the kraguers. Letting out cries of hope and fury, they snarled at Jeb and crowded around him, hissing and spitting in disgust. Jeb’s eyes widened in horror and he shrank back against the ground, quivering in terror while the kraguers surrounded him. One of the outlaws lashed out with his paw, raking his claws across Jeb’s face. Jeb let out a shriek of pain and jumped back in fear, feeling a few drops of blood slip down his stinging cheek.

A furious snarl suddenly erupted in the crowd. “Hey! You leave my son alone!”

Jeb looked up just in time to see Jati lunge forward and land just in front of him, bristling in fury. Letting out a sharp hiss, she flashed her claws across the face of the outlaw that had attacked him, sending him staggering back in pain. “Listen up,” she snarled, baring her fangs. “Any of you touch him and you’ll get worse! You’re all a bunch of lunatics! Just because Jeben doesn’t understand doesn’t give you any right to do this!”

Telku gaped in disbelief and pushed his way forward to stand in front of Jati. “Jati,” he hissed through gritted teeth. “Surely you can see this is wrong.”

She held her head up higher. “I believe the creatures will get what’s coming to them. But just because someone thinks differently doesn’t give the rest of you any right to attack him! Everybody leave him alone unless you want your face clawed off!”

“Just get him out of here.”

Jeb turned to look up at the sound of the cold voice, his heart still beating rapidly with fear and his sight beginning to blur with frightened tears. Secka stood just a few feet in front of them, glancing down at them with a dark, condescending expression. A tiny hint of amusement danced behind the darkness in his gray eyes. Behind him, Zerone and Keruni watched the scene through narrowed eyes. To Jeb’s surprise, a small glimmer of concern darkened their gazes and their expressions were grave, rather than entertained.

Telku gritted his teeth. "Secka...everybody...this isn't right. You've got to see that. Not just us, but Zerone's kraguers. Can't you see this is too far? Jeben is right!"

Secka raised an eyebrow. "You started this, Telku."

Telku winced. "It's getting out of hand! I didn't want this!"

"Too late now." Secka shrugged apathetically. "Since you're too soft, I guess I'll take over now." His eyes narrowed and he let out a cold growl before he could protest. "This is war, Telku. War is harsh. And anyone who can't take that doesn't belong."

# Chapter Twelve

## Guilt

A frigid wind whisked through the den, filling its hollowed alcoves with a gust of freezing air. Saderia shivered violently on the cold, hard bed and tugged her blanket tighter around her, but the scratchy material wasn't thick enough to ward off the cold. Curling herself into a ball, she closed her eyes and begged for sleep. No matter how tightly she squeezed her eyes shut, though, sleep drifted away from her. A soft, eerie wailing filled the den as a cold wind whisked through the rocky walls of the house.

Letting out a hiss, she forced herself to stagger out of bed with her blanket curled around her. Bracing herself against the blast of cold air from the unrelenting wind, she darted out of her room and stumbled into the entrance to Dash's room. "Dash!"

Dash pricked his ears and rolled over, his eyes shining in the darkness. "Hmm?"

She shivered. "Can I sleep with you tonight? It's freezing."

"Sure." Relief lit up his eyes as he patted the spot on the bed next to him.

Letting out a sigh, she staggered across the frigid floor and pulled herself up onto the rocky bed beside him. Huddling under his blanket and curling herself into a ball, she let her fur brush his. His dark fur felt like a million tiny hairs of pure ice, but she could feel a small hint of warmth radiating from him. Dash carefully wrapped both blankets over them and curled up beside her, letting his dark brown mane fall over his face. Feeling a bit warmer, Saderia managed a slight smile as sleep drifted back into her grasp.

A freezing wind rustled past her face. Dirty clumps of matted orange fur hung off her gaunt body. The freezing ground beneath her pressed against her sore paws. The craggy walls of the den closed in around

her, covering her in a dark, frigid shadow. Darkness ruled every corner of the house, sending shivers of dread down her spine.

A dark figure laid huddled in shadows beyond the enclosing walls surrounding the entrance of the room. Limp dark brown fur shuddered unsteadily up and down, rising and falling with each wheezing breath. His harsh breath filled every inch of the dark, hollow den. Saderia desperately reached out a paw, but couldn't reach him. A thousand miles of cold, rocky ground seemed to spread out between them.

The figure's dark brown fur shuddered, then slowly fell still. Silence seeped into the tense air of the house. Anguish and agony as sharp as a knife sliced through Saderia's heart as the scene grew dark, carrying the still lion away from her until there was nothing left but darkness and despair.

"Saderia?" Her eyes fluttered at the sound of the warm, familiar voice. "Saderia, wake up! What's wrong?"

Saderia blinked open her eyes in a room full of darkness. Feeling her heart skip, she instantly sat up and froze. Two wide amber eyes met hers, shimmering with concern. The dread and anguish burning in her chest seemed to melt away in his warm gaze. Relief washed over her so strongly it left her feeling weak. Tears stung her eyes and before she could think, she let out a cry and pounced him to the ground. Dash let out a surprised yelp as they tumbled backward onto the floor in a mess of fur and blankets.

Tangled in a cocoon of scratchy blankets, Saderia buried her face in Dash's fur when his back slumped against the ground.

He blinked several times. "S-Saderia?"

She faced him with scared, worried amber eyes. "Dash? You're okay, right?"

"Um...yeah...I'm fine. Except...you kind of pounced me to the floor..."

She blinked and looked around as if noticing where they were for the first time. "Oh...er, sorry," she said sheepishly. "I just...I just had a weird nightmare, I guess."

Dash carefully untangled her from the blanket and gently rolled her off him. Wriggling out from underneath the fabric, he stood up at the same time she did and faced her curiously. "Saderia, are you okay? You were

crying and talking in your sleep and shivering, too. I tried to wake you up because you seemed so upset..."

His words barely registered as she scanned him with her eyes, checking him over as best as she could to make sure he wasn't hurt. His dark fur was tangled and scars crisscrossed his face and body, but he had looked that way for weeks. To her relief, he didn't seem to have any other injuries. She tried to tell herself to relax.

Dash frowned in confusion and studied her curiously. "Saderia?"

She blinked and looked up at him, shaking away her thoughts. "Hmm? Oh, I was probably just shivering because it was cold and I just had a nightmare about what's going on in the forest...nothing big."

She looked over him a second time to make sure he was truly fine. She eyed his belly to make sure he wasn't gaunt and underfed and realized with a sigh of relief that he seemed no skinnier than usual. His fur seemed healthy even though it was matted. His dark, unruly mane splayed out in every direction, and she managed a smile before running a paw through his dark brown fur to smooth it down. Giving him a grin, she flicked her tail and signaled for him to follow her. Dash blinked in confusion, but she didn't notice as she led the way to the kitchen and looked around for a snack. Her heart sank when she glanced toward the craggy table and saw only one scrawny apple sitting on top.

She grabbed the apple and turned it around in her paw, her eyes glimmering with disappointment. Her stomach growled, making her uncomfortably aware of how hungry she was. Ignoring the sharp pangs in her belly, she held the apple out to Dash.

"No, you eat it," Dash murmured, pushing the apple away. "I got the last ration."

Saderia didn't remember that. She wasn't sure if he was lying or not. Biting back a protest, she sighed and nibbled on the apple. Her stomach growled again as a sharp memory of her dream flashed through her mind. She shuddered in the cool air and tried to let the warm rays of the distant, rising sun melt away the fear of her dream.

"Saderia, are you okay?" Dash murmured, stepping closer to her. "You seemed really upset in your sleep. What kind of dream was it?"

She looked away and sighed. "Just...just a normal nightmare, I guess. I have them sometimes." A lie. She rarely had any dreams anymore



and none of her previous nightmares had terrified her as much and made her feel so weak and exhausted.

Dash studied her carefully, then nodded and looked at the entrance of the den. "We should probably try to collect some food today since that apple was all we had left."

"Good idea," she agreed, glancing toward the sunny woods.

He gave her a careful glance. "Do you want to talk about your dream first?"

She shivered involuntarily and turned away. "No."

Dash opened his mouth to question her, but he was interrupted by the scraping sound of claws on stone. Saderia and Dash looked up in surprise to see Cia slumping into the entrance, her tail drooping and her tired eyes outlined with dark bags.

"I just talked to your parents," she murmured tiredly. "They already left a while ago. Jash and I have some work to do today. You two are to stay here to collect rations and rest. Enjoy it. They'll be back for a few minutes later today."

Saderia sighed. "Okay, Cia."

Her aunt nodded, then turned around and staggered out of the den and off into the woods with an exhausted sigh. Saderia sighed with sympathy. Days had passed by, but none of the forest animals seemed willing to ever trust the King and Queen again. Disasters disrupted the forest and Karenisha and Makero rushed to help, but the forest animals all but threw them out of their neighborhoods to show them they were unwanted. They listened, but barely, and not without convincing. Every day, Karenisha and Makero came home for less than an hour with fur scorched by a geyser or covered in dirt from a pitfall. No matter what they did or how hard they worked to help them, the forest animals still distrusted them and treated them like the enemy.

Feeling sorry for them, Saderia looked down and followed Dash out of the house with her eyes locked on her paws. She looked up when her paws met the grass and walked beside her friend past the rocky wall of the house. A small fruit tree rose up close to her house. Usually there was plenty of ripe fruit beneath its lush leaves.

When they stopped in front of the tree, Saderia suddenly remembered Dash saying she had been talking in her sleep and felt a wave

of embarrassment and unease. “Um...Dash?” She hesitated uncertainly. “When I was sleeping...what did I say?”

Dash paused and shrugged. “Well...I couldn’t really hear it all, but I think you said something about...losing someone.” He trailed off and gave her a sympathetic look. “Were you, um, dreaming about Dingo?”

She blinked and turned away, her eyes darkening. “Yeah,” she lied. “Dingo.” A wave of guilt washed over her the instant she said his name and she wanted to kick herself. How could she use the death of one friend to lie to another friend? Dash rested his tail comfortably on her shoulder, making her heart ache with pain and guilt. He opened his mouth to speak and comfort her, but she cut him off before he could hurt her with his kind words. “Just get the fruit and let’s get back. Just forget about the dream.”

He sighed. “If that’s what you want.” Bunching his muscles, he leapt up into the tree and clawed his way onto a sturdy branch to search for fruit. His paws shifted through the dozens of leafy branches and his tail hung down from the tree like a dark brown vine. Saderia could see his dark mane catch on a branch as he glanced through the leaves.

She sat back to wait for him to throw down some fruit, then paused and looked up when his puzzled voice floated down to her.

“Well, this is odd...”

She frowned in misunderstanding and glanced up at the bright branches. “What?”

He poked his head out of the leaves and frowned in confusion. “There’s only a few apples up here...I swore there was more last night.”

Saderia blinked in confusion, then shrugged. “Maybe the cold killed some.”

Dash frowned in unease. “Maybe...but if the cold killed them, the apples would be withered and rotten, not completely gone... It’s like some just disappeared...”

She frowned in wonder. “That’s kind of weird. Is it that serious?”

Dash ducked his head back into the tree and shrugged, making the leaves shudder around him. “I guess not... It just seems kind of weird to me...”

Although it didn’t seem that horrible, for some reason it sent an odd, eerie shiver down her spine, but she tried not to think about it. This was nothing compared to her other problems. Giving another shrug, she flicked

her tail impatiently and sat back once more. “Well, is there enough to last us for a few days?”

He nodded distractedly. “Yeah, hold on, I found some more.” The leaves shivered around him and a moment later, a few apples tumbled out of the tree. Reaching out, Saderia caught each one and lined them up in a neat row to carry inside. When Dash leapt down and helped her bring the fruit into the kitchen, Saderia briefly puzzled over what Dash had said about the fruit. It did seem a bit odd...but they had more pressing problems to deal with. “Forget what Cia and Mom said, we should see if anyone needs any help,” she announced after setting the fruit down on the table. “We can rest later.”

“You’re right,” Dash said. “I think I know some places we haven’t checked yet.”

Saderia smiled and led the way outside. As they darted off into the bright, chilly forest, the dream started to fade from Saderia’s mind and neither of them remembered that Dash hadn’t eaten a single ration that morning.

“The creatures are suffering!” Secka’s cold, excited voice rang out through the Spring, echoing off of the rocky walls.

Jeb looked up at the sound of the loud voice, his heart skipping in his chest. Letting the tiny piece of fruit in his paws drop onto the floor, he turned around in his tiny cave den and crept toward the entrance with his father close beside him. Groups of outlaws were gathered around the rocky floor outside his den. Several lone criminals sat in the shadows covering the back of the cave, while others lingered and murmured together near the edge of the dry, mold-covered basin. At the sound of Secka’s voice, all of the outlaws looked up with eyes wide with surprise. Standing in the beam of moonlight on the other side of the basin, the gray outlaw stared out with eyes glimmering with a wild, eerie excitement.

On the other side of the Spring, Citcha looked up from a piece of fruit and frowned. “What do you mean?”

Secka glanced around at the kraguers and grinned. “The creatures are suffering. Ever since we started taking the food, they’ve been looking a little uneasy. Now a lot of the trees are bare. Some of the creatures are

already struggling to find food. I saw some littler ones traveling all over the forest to find a tree. Soon a lot of them might be dead.”

Dead silence met his revelation.

Jeb felt a rush of horror and sickness wash over him. His eyes grew wide with dismay and an overwhelming sense of guilt surged through him. Thoughts of the suffering creatures searching desperately for food flickered through his mind, making his heart ache with regret. “D-dead?” he choked out. “We’re actually...killing them?”

Telku’s eyes darkened. He rested his short, brown-tufted tail reassuringly on Jeb’s shoulder, but before he could speak, a sharp voice sounded from inside the den.

“What’s happening now?” Jati snapped, shoving her way past Jeb and Telku into the main part of the Spring. “What are you going on about?”

Citcha stared at Secka for a long moment, her pale blue eyes narrowed in a strange, unreadable expression. Shaking herself, she forced herself to smile a wide grin. “The creatures are suffering, Jati! We’re torturing them! Some are already starving!” She grinned when she glanced up at Secka. “Our plan is working!”

A few of the outlaws around her exchanged cautious glances and murmured softly to each other, breaking the tense silence surrounding the Spring. After a few moments, some of the other outlaws forced a smile and grinned. Within a few minutes, all of the criminals had broken out into excited whispers. Soon the entire Spring was filled with wild, eager cheers. Some of the outlaws that had helped to steal the fruit puffed out their chests in pride before shrinking back at a scorching glare from Secka.

Jeb and Telku stood frozen to the spot, their eyes dark and grim. Outside their den, Jati stood numbly in place, staring at the wild celebration with wide eyes. Her ears were flattened and after a long moment, she looked down at her paws and didn’t say a word. To Jeb’s surprise, she remained frozen in place instead of joining the celebration.

Citcha let out another shout of excitement, then frowned when she caught sight of Jeb’s mother. “Well?” the thief hissed, raising an eyebrow. “Aren’t you excited? This is great! The creatures might leave soon!”

Jati looked up slowly, her blue and gray eyes suddenly dull and distant. “Yeah,” she muttered. “Great.” Turning around, she trailed listlessly back toward her cave den, letting her brown-tufted tail trail behind her.

Hanging her head, she pushed past Telku and Jeb and disappeared into the shadows of their den without saying a thing.

Citcha blinked in surprise, then shrugged and grinned. "Oh, well. This is perfect!"

Her words were drowned out in the cheers of the outlaws. A feeling of disgust rose in Jeb's chest at the sight of the celebration. Staring out at the criminals, he caught a few of them staying quiet with uneasy expressions, but after a long hesitation, they broke out into cheers as well. The excitement seemed to spread throughout the entire cavern.

Shivering, Jeb looked up toward Secka and felt his heart skip a beat. A cold glint lit up the outlaw's shadowed gray eyes and a cold sneer spread across his face at the sight of the celebration. His cold, sinister look seemed so much different than the normal, uncaring expression he usually wore. A tiny shiver of dread slipped down Jeb's spine. Secka had been the only one in the Spring he had dared to trust from the time he had gotten there...How could he have not noticed how cruel he could be?

"We're winning against the creatures," Secka said lazily over the din of nervous celebration. "We'll show them this is *our* forest."

Cheers rose up, making the whole cavern echo with excited shouts. Uneasiness glimmered in the eyes of some kraguers, but all of them rose their voices in triumph.

A cold sneer spread across Secka's face. "Once we're done with them, there won't be a single creature left!"

The outlaws cheered in determination, while a burning hot sense of fury suddenly surged through Jeb's body. Lashing his tail in anger, he stepped out of the den and faced Secka before he could think about what he was doing. Feeling a sense of rage sear his chest, he let out a furious shout. "Yeah, because you'll wipe them out!"

The celebration suddenly stopped. The eager voices of the kraguers died away into a sudden, tense silence. Seeming to freeze in place, every outlaw slowly turned around to stare at him with wide, stunned eyes. Surrounded by thick, uncomfortable silence and the penetrating, shocked stares of the outlaws, Jeb tried not to shiver, but the burning sense of rage was rapidly ebbing away into terror. Whispers floated around the Spring. Pricking his ears, Jeb tried to listen to the sudden voices, but he could only pick out a few words.

“Did *Jeb* just say that?”

“...crazy...”

Jeb narrowed his eyes, then suddenly pricked his ears at the sound of a soft, cautious voice. “Maybe he’s right...”

Secka narrowed his eyes and glared at whoever had spoken, instantly quieting them. The rest of the crowd fell deathly silent, staring at Jeb with stunned eyes. Secka glanced up at Jeb, making the blue and green-eyed kraguer shrink back in fear when their eyes met. Raising an eyebrow, Secka leapt over the basin and landed smoothly on the stony ground on the other side. Stalking forward, he stepped toward Jeb until he stood just a few inches in front of him. The eyes of the outlaws bored into them.

Telku took a nervous step toward them, his green eyes narrowing in concern. “Secka,” he growled, lashing his tail in warning. “Don’t you...”

“I’m just going to talk to him, Telku,” Secka interrupted, lightly flicking his tail and never taking his eyes off Jeb. His gray eyes narrowed contemptuously when he sat back in front of Jeb and he sniffed in disdain. “Well, well, well. Out of everyone here, I wouldn’t have expected a wimp like you to shout out such a foolish statement.”

Jeb shivered under his dark, intense stare and tried to hide a glimmer of fear.

“Did you enjoy making a fool of yourself or did you think everyone would agree with you and stop thinking of you as the pathetic coward you are?” Secka’s cold, drawling voice turned to a dark, savage growl and he raked the ground with his claws to send a paw full of gravel showering over him.

Jeb squeezed his eyes shut as the pebbles rained over him and whimpered in fear.

“Secka!” Telku let out a furious shout and lunged forward to stand in front of Jeb. Whirling around to face the gray kraguer, Telku opened his mouth to snarl at him, but before he could speak, Secka slapped him, digging five bloody gashes across his muzzle.

The gray kraguer narrowed his eyes and let out a cold hiss. “Don’t make a fool of yourselves with things you don’t understand.” After glancing back and forth between Telku’s bloody face and Jeb’s horrified expression, Secka sniffed and whipped around to stalk away from them, his gray eyes glinting in the dim light.

Jeb stared after him with wide, stunned eyes, too terrified to speak.

Beside him, Telku narrowed his eyes and let out a low growl. “Come on, Jeben. Let’s get back to the den.” Turning around, he stalked back toward the den with his ears flattened and his tail dragging against the ground.

Stumbling after him, Jeb fell into step behind his father, but his eyes lingered on Secka as the gray kraguer stormed away. Trying to hide a whimper of shock and fear, Jeb forced himself to turn around and duck into his den after Telku. Sitting back against the rocky ground, he tried to relax, but he frowned when he scanned the den around him.

Against the back wall of the den, Jati sat completely still, staring forlornly at the wall with dull, distant blue and gray eyes. Her ears and tail drooped with defeat and her eyes seemed absent, as if she was seeing something they weren’t.

Telku blinked in surprise, then narrowed his eyes with worry and stepped over to stand beside her. “Jati?”

Jati didn’t respond. A flick of her tail was the only indication she had heard him.

“Jati?” he repeated. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” she muttered, her soft voice just barely audible. Lowering her head, she stepped silently toward the entrance. “I’m going out,” she muttered, hiding her face.

Telku stepped forward to stop her, then paused and simply nodded. He watched her with worried green eyes as she stepped soundlessly out of the cave den and disappeared behind a wall of rock.

Jeb looked up at his father in surprise. “What’s wrong with Mom?”

Telku sighed. “Don’t worry about her, Jeb. It’s about time it set in—guilt.”

The sounds of celebration echoed from the main part of the Spring all throughout the night. Lying on his side in his cold, damp cave den, Jeb narrowed his eyes and felt a flash of anger. The eager, triumphant voices of the outlaws talking excitedly about the creature’s pain and laughing to each other burned in his ears. Words of congratulations to the kraguers who had helped steal the fruit could be heard even at a distance. Without thinking, Jeb dug his claws into the stony ground, then winced when one of his claws

splintered against the rough floor. Across from him, Telku laid against the ground, staring dully out at the wall the same way Jati had. Jeb's mother still hadn't returned to the den, but Telku had assured him that she would be fine. Jati still needed some time on her own.

Narrowing his eyes, Jeb glared down at the stony ground and sharply flicked his tail, trying to ignore the guilt creeping into his mind. He heaved a sigh, then paused and frowned in confusion when the commotion outside suddenly died away. Blinking in wonder, Jeb slowly lifted his head and pushed himself to his paws. Behind him, his father pulled himself up and padded toward the entrance of the den. The two of them silently peered out into the rest of the Spring with narrowed, curious eyes.

Secka was nowhere in sight. The rest of the outlaws stood silently around the Spring. Their excited expressions and eager cheers had faded away into uneasy, uncertain expressions. All of the outlaws remained silent and stepped uncomfortably away from one another, keeping their eyes locked on their paws and refusing to meet anyone's eyes. A few of the criminals still seemed to rejoice in the news with looks of excitement and determination, but they had the sense to retreat back to their shadowed dens to enjoy their own private parties. The rest of the outlaws cast scared, furtive glances around at the others. A tinge of guilt tainted their eyes. Even Citcha, who had been bouncing up and down with excitement just moments before, looked uneasy and nervous.

Exchanging a quick glance, Telku and Jeb cautiously padded out of the den and crept across the Spring to stand in front of the thief.

"Citcha?" Telku murmured, sitting back beside her. "Where's Secka?"

Citcha shrugged and kept her gaze trained on her paws. "He went out for fruit or something, I guess." She looked up for a moment and glanced around the Spring before heaving a sigh and trailing back toward her den, letting her tail brush against the ground.

Jeb blinked at her in surprise and looked around with wide eyes. "Dad, what's wrong with them?" he whispered, staring at the outlaw's uneasy expressions. "One minute they're celebrating and the next minute they're depressed?"

Telku let out a sigh. "A lot of them feel the same as your mother. Look closely."



Jeb blinked in surprise, then studied the faces of the criminals. A jolt of surprise shot through him when he recognized a twinge of fear in their eyes. "They're afraid," Jeb murmured, feeling a hint of sympathy. "I...I guess I can't blame them for being afraid of those creatures and wanting them gone...but I don't want anyone to get hurt."

"Look harder," Telku murmured. "It's not just the creatures they're afraid of."

Jeb frowned and studied their faces more closely. A sense of understanding washed over him when he saw a glimmer of guilt and confusion in their eyes. The creatures were almost certainly a threat, yet they didn't feel right hurting them. The confusion in their eyes was the same Jeb felt. Some of the colder, crueller outlaws who had committed horrible crimes didn't care at all about hurting the creatures, but a lot of the ones who had committed petty crimes seemed to regret what they had done.

Jeb narrowed his eyes and stared uncomfortably down at his paws. He wanted the creatures gone as much as anybody else, but the way Secka and Zerone were doing it just didn't seem right. Could the others possibly believe him? He frowned in wonder and confusion. If that was true, why had they just celebrated moments ago with Secka, as if they completely agreed with him? Were they...afraid of him? In such a short time, the gray kraguer had seemed to become their self-appointed leader for the 'extermination of the creatures.' Did he have more power than Jeb had originally thought?

Feeling his mind whirl with wonder, he turned away from Telku. "I'll be right back," he called. Before his father could stop him, he darted away from him and leapt over the basin in the center of the Spring. His blue and green eyes gleamed with determination as he lunged forward to pull himself into the upper world. If he couldn't convince Secka to stop this torture, perhaps he could convince someone else.

Jeb felt shaky with fear as he stumbled through the dark woods. His fur bristled with terror at being so far away from his Spring, but he forced himself to shake off the worry and unease. Staggering forward, he dove into a nearby bush and wriggled forward to peek out through the other side. A jolt of surprise rushed through him when he realized two kraguers were standing on the other side.

In the center of a wide clearing, standing several feet away from the wide, sparkling waters of the Sight Pond, stood Zerone and Keruni. The two kraguers faced each other and huddled close together in a beam of moonlight, their fur fluffed out in the cold air of the night. Even from a distance, Jeb could see tears sliding down Keruni's face and read the fear and pain in her bright green eyes.

"Daddy, I'm scared," she whispered, shivering in the frigid wind. "I heard that those creatures are suffering because we took the food and that some of them might starve to death." Her eyes grew wide with horror. "Daddy, am I going to be a murderer?"

Zerone narrowed his eyes. "No, Keruni." He hesitated, then looked away and let out a sigh. "But...I am. I didn't think this through. This is too far. This isn't right. But..."

"Daddy, I don't want anyone else to die," Keruni choked out, cutting him off. "It'll be all my fault again!"

Zerone's eyes widened as Keruni squeezed her eyes shut and let a few tears slip down her face. The Emperor stared down at her with a stunned, horrified expression. "Keruni..." he stammered shakily. "I thought you didn't remember..."

Keruni shook her head fiercely and looked up at him with wide, gleaming green eyes. "Make it stop. You're the Emperor, you have to make all of this just *stop*."

The Emperor hesitated. "But Keruni...I know this is horrible, but what if those creatures are as dangerous as we think? What if they get you?"

"Then I'll deserve it," she hissed, her fur bristling with pain and fury. Zerone winced and opened his mouth to scold her, but she let out a desperate gasp before he could speak. "Just end this! Please! They'll listen to you if you tell them to stop! I don't want anyone else to get hurt! I don't want anyone else to *die*!"

Indecision glimmered in Zerone's gray and green eyes along with fear and panic, and when Jeb looked at Keruni, he could barely even recognize her. Guilty tears streamed down her cheeks and her eyes were narrowed with pain and sorrow. Since when did Keruni ever feel guilty or merciful or anything other than arrogance?

Zerone hesitated for a long moment. After what felt like ages, he finally let out a tortured sigh. “All right, Keruni. Next time we meet, I’ll stop this. You’re right. No one deserves this treatment and none of us deserve this on our conscience.”

Warmth glowed in Jeb’s chest as he padded back toward the Spring. Ducking under shadowed tree branches and weaving around eerie clumps of bushes, he couldn’t help but feel a glimmer of appreciation for Zerone. It felt strange to think of his archenemy as having a heart and it felt even weirder to feel sorry for his ex-friend, but he couldn’t help the tiny hint of warmth he felt toward the royal family.

Creeping through the shadowed woods, he suddenly felt less afraid than before. Somehow he felt safer knowing he no longer had to hurt the creatures after Zerone stopped it at the next meeting. He barely bothered to look out for any of the creatures or keep his ears pricked for any noises. With every step, his mind whirled with hopeful possibilities. Maybe the kraguers and the creatures could coexist in the same forest after all. Living in hiding wasn’t bad, especially if he no longer had to suffer the guilt of tormenting the creatures. They might not even need to hide...

Lost in his thoughts, Jeb continued moving obliviously through the forest, then froze and let out a shriek of terror when something suddenly leapt out of the bushes in front of him. Feeling his heart skip with horror, he staggered backward with a whimper of fear and shrank back against the ground. When the animal landed neatly in front of him, he blinked, then slowly looked up with wide, surprised blue and green eyes.

“Secka?”

The gray outlaw narrowed his eyes. “Jeb. What are you doing here?”

“L-looking for my Mom,” Jeb stammered, thinking fast and feeling his heart skip.

Secka frowned. “Jati went back to the Spring a few hours ago. I saw her.”

Jeb shifted uncomfortably. “I should probably get home then,” he whimpered.

Secka’s dark gray eyes glinted in the dim light. “No, not yet, Jeben.” Lashing his tail, he stalked closer to Jeb until he was towering over him

with a cold, condescending glare. "What are you playing at?"

Jeb blinked and opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Struggling to control the fearful beating of his heart, he choked out, "Nothing! I...I just think it's wrong to hurt the creatures!"

Secka curled his lip. "Well, get used to it because there will be a lot more, Jeb. We're all going to keep trying to drive out those creatures and there's nothing you can do about it. It's not like anyone's going to listen to you."

Jeb flattened his ears. "They might listen to the Emperor then."

The gray kraguer frowned. "What do you mean by that?" Before Jeb could come up with an excuse, he shook his head. "Never mind. It doesn't matter. With any luck, there won't be an Emperor for long."

Jeb blinked in shock, feeling a cold rush of fear. "What does that mean?"

Secka just chuckled and slowly turned around to stalk away. His tail flicked lightly back and forth as he padded calmly away from Jeb in the direction of the Spring. "I've got nothing against the creatures, to be honest," he called lazily over his shoulder. "In fact, I sort of appreciate them, seeing as how they always seem to cover for me."

"Jeb, wake up. Something's happening."

"Huh?" Jeb's eyes fluttered open in the dim light of the den. Blinking rapidly, he slowly looked around and found himself staring up into his father's grave face. "What's going on?" he stammered, narrowing his eyes in confusion.

"Secka's taking the outlaws to a meeting with Zerone tonight," Telku murmured. "I think we should follow them."

A jolt of alarm rushed through Jeb and he opened his mouth to protest, then paused. The conversation he had overheard between Zerone and Keruni suddenly flashed through his mind, making his heart leap with hope. Jumping to his paws, he shook off his lingering tiredness and nodded eagerly. "Okay. You're right. We should go."

"Wait a minute, Jeb." His father looked down at him with a confused, curious glance. "You sure are anxious. Did...something happen last night?"

Jeb narrowed his eyes and let his gaze remain locked on the entrance to the cave den. "You'll know soon enough, I hope."

Telku frowned and studied him closely. "All right," he murmured after a long moment of hesitation. "But wait just a minute." He looked down and met his eyes. "I want to follow Secka, and to do that, we're going to have to be sneaky. We don't want him to know we're following him to the meeting."

"O-okay," Jeb stammered.

"If you ask me, Secka's gone off the deep end," Jati muttered, rising up from the stony ground with a long yawn. Telku and Jeb turned around to see her stretch out her legs and blink the sleepiness out of her eyes. Her blue and gray irises still held a tiny tingle of guilt. Facing her, Telku narrowed his eyes in a sympathetic gaze that Jati tried to ignore. A long moment of uncomfortable silence spread out between them.

After what felt like ages, Jati suddenly let out a sigh. "I suppose an apology is due, huh? All right. I'm sorry, Telku, Jeben. I've been thinking about all that's been going on for a while and you were right about torturing the creatures and how it was going too far. You were right when you said it had to stop." She hesitated and let out another long sigh, her fur prickling with discomfort. "I was wrong. I'm sorry. Will you guys forgive me?"

Telku gave her a kind smile. "Already done, Jati."

She hesitated, then tentatively returned the smile. "Thanks. In that case, I'm coming with you to the meeting. And if I get a chance to rip Secka apart, I'll take it."

Jeb relaxed at her harsh, biting tone, realizing she was back to normal, while his father just rolled his eyes. "Try to control yourself," Telku murmured, flicking her with his tail as he padded past her to peek out of the den. He nudged Jeb and Jati as they crept up beside him and cast suspicious glances around at the spring. His eyes glittered with determination. "They're leaving. Come on, let's follow them and get this over with."

Moonlight shimmered down on the wide clearing holding the glimmering, bright blue Sight Pond, casting an eerie silver glow over the grass. Trailing silently through the thick grass and avoiding the sharp branches reaching down toward them, Jeb and his parents ducked into a thick clump of bushes on the side of the clearing. Being careful not to let

the bushes rustle around them, they wriggled past the slapping branches and the flurry of dark leaves to peer out into the clearing where the meeting took place.

Secka stood just a few feet in front of them with his back turned to them. Several outlaws sat behind him, facing the kraguers in front of him with dark, cold glares and sneers. Zerone and his kraguers sat opposite Secka with the Emperor sitting calmly in the front. Keruni huddled close beside her father. Dark bags hung under the Emperor's tired gray and green eyes, but an aura of confidence seemed to radiate from him. Beside him, Keruni seemed small and weak, her eyes narrowed with pain and unease and her fur dirty and uncared-for. Secka stared calmly back at them, meeting the Emperor's gaze with a strange, creepy glint in his eyes.

"So..." Zerone muttered. "Telku's officially stopped coming to these meetings?"

Secka shrugged. "Yep, now it's down to just you and me, Zerone."

The Emperor narrowed his eyes. "No, actually, I'm afraid we won't be having these meetings anymore."

Jeb's heart leapt with hope and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Keruni look up with a hopeful gleam in her green eyes. In front of him, the criminals exchanged confused glances. A few murmurs of confusion and wonder rose up from the crowd of outlaws.

Secka frowned and narrowed his eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, as it seems, I've decided we're not going to continue trying to sabotage the creatures," Zerone replied in a calm, smooth voice.

Secka raised an eyebrow. "Oh, really? Why the sudden change of heart?"

"It's gone too far." Zerone met his gaze with a cold stare. "It's not right and I refuse to take part in it. I command all of my kraguers as well as yours to stop this futile battle and return to your dens. If we must live a life in hiding, we shall. Either way, these meetings will stop along with any plans to hurt the creatures."

Jeb felt his heart leap with hope at Zerone's commanding voice and he couldn't help but feel a tiny hint of respect for the Emperor. Beside him, Telku and Jati gaped at him with stunned, amazed expressions. A tiny glimmer of hope colored their eyes.

A small hint of relief gleamed in the eyes of the outlaws standing behind Secka, along with a noticeable gleam of surprise at the Emperor's sudden decision. The same sense of relief made Jeb break out in a small, hopeful smile when he realized he would no longer have to trek through a dangerous forest just to hurt the animals who hadn't done a thing to hurt him. Living in hiding still seemed miserable and creepy, but without the guilt of hurting the creatures, the thought didn't seem nearly as bad as it used to. Maybe the same thoughts had dawned in the minds of the outlaws.

Secka stared at Zerone in shock for a long moment. Ages seemed to pass by before he finally narrowed his eyes in a cold glare. Gritting his teeth, he let out a dangerous snarl, his eyes glinting with fury and disgust. "You might be a coward, Zerone, but I, for one, am not. I'll continue my plans no matter what you say."

"No, Secka," Zerone snarled in a stern voice, narrowing his eyes at the gray kraguer. "This ends now. As Emperor, I order it."

Secka let out a humorless laugh. "That's funny, Zerone. Let me remind you that you're not *my* Emperor and I don't have to listen to you. Your orders mean nothing."

A hint of alarm flickered past Zerone's stony gaze. Beside him, Keruni looked up in horror, her green eyes stretching wide and gleaming with dismay.

The Emperor opened his mouth to speak, but Secka cut him off with a low growl. "If that's the way you want it, Zerone, then fine. These meetings were Telku's idea and I've grown a bit sick of them myself. Since you no longer have the spine to continue what you started, I'll finish it myself. I think you'll find that I have plenty of others on my side to help me. Right?" The gray outlaw glanced back at the kraguers behind him with a threatening glare. The outlaws all looked up and nodded rapidly, letting out tiny murmurs of agreement and exchanging fearful glances with their neighbors. Raising an eyebrow, Secka turned back and sneered at Zerone. "I think you'll find that once I'm finished, every creature in this forest will be dead."

Keruni's eyes widened in horror at the outlaw's cold words. Zerone glanced down at her with wide, stunned gray and green eyes, then turned slowly to look at Secka with a guarded, dangerous glare. "This is my

forest,” he whispered. “I will not have you disobey my orders and put us all in jeopardy. I *will* stop you.”

Secka snorted. “Good luck with that. Once I take care of these creatures, I highly doubt it will be *your* forest anymore.” Giving Zerone one last glare, he whirled around and stalked away from him, carving a path through the crowd of outlaws around him. With a sharp flick of his tail, he signaled for the criminals to follow him and disappeared into the shadows surrounding the edges of the clearing.

Zerone gritted his teeth and glared at the spot where the gray outlaw had vanished. “Go home,” he hissed, lashing his tail at the kraguers seated behind him.

Exchanging nervous glances, Zerone’s followers hastily jumped to their paws and darted back in the direction of the Court, casting worried gazes back at their leader. After a few moments, all of them had disappeared into the darkness covering the woods around them, leaving Zerone and Keruni standing alone in the clearing.

“We should go,” Telku murmured tensely. Giving Zerone and Keruni one last glance, he slowly turned around and started to back out of the bush. Jati hesitated for a moment, then carefully pulled her way out of the undergrowth and followed him. Jeb paused even longer, casting a lingering glance at his archenemy and ex-friend before reluctantly pulling himself to his paws and creeping out of the thick brush.

Picking his way silently through the forest and weaving around thick tree trunks, Jeb tried to push the memory of Zerone’s frightened gaze and Keruni’s tearful eyes out of his head, but the images lingered. Guilt stirred in his chest and his heart began to beat faster with regret with every step he took away from the two kraguers. Looking up, he started to walk more slowly and watched his parents stare intently at the woods ahead of them, too concentrated on finding a way home to notice anything else. Jeb hesitated for a long moment, his mind whirling with indecision, before silently ducking behind a tree and slipping away from them to run back to the meeting place.

Fighting his way past rough branches and thick patches of bushes, he raced back to the clearing and dove into the bushes on the edge of the meeting place. His heart pounded rapidly with fear, but his eyes glimmered



with curiosity and he instantly inched forward to see if the two royal kraguers were still there.

Keruni stood with her back turned to him, but even from his position, Jeb could see tears gleaming on the edges of her eyes. Her dirty, unkempt tail flicked miserably back and forth and she stared up at her father with wide, desperate eyes. Zerone kept his gaze trained on his paws, his expression stony and grave.

“He can’t do this!” Keruni choked out. “It’s not right!”

Zerone heaved a sigh. “Keruni, let’s go home.”

She furiously shook her head. “No! I won’t let him do this!” Before Zerone could protest, she whipped around and darted into the shadows of the woods surrounding them.

Zerone’s eyes widened in shock. “Keruni, stop!” Leaping to his paws, he bounded after her, his gray and green eyes gleaming with fear and dismay. “Wait!”

Keruni narrowed her eyes and ignored his calls. Lunging forward, she darted through the woods and ducked into a nearby bush, running right into Jeb. She let out a cry of pain and surprise when she smacked up against him, while Jeb let out a squeak of alarm. They both jumped back in shock and stared at each other with stunned eyes.

Keruni blinked several times. “Jeb?” Before he could respond, her eyes lit up and she lunged forward to grab him by the scruff. Jeb let out a cry of shock and protest, but she ignored his yelp of alarm and yanked him forward, trying to drag him out of the thin bush into another, thicker clump of undergrowth waiting nearby.

Jeb let out a shout and struggled frantically. “Ahh! Keruni, what are you doing?”

She wrinkled her nose and glared at him out of the corner of her eye. Shoving him into a thick clump of undergrowth, she let go of him and tossed him onto the ground, making him stumble and wince with pain.

“Why did you lead me here?” Jeb demanded as he struggled to push himself up.

“Just tell me something!” she hissed, her green eyes glinting. “You don’t believe those creatures should be hurt, do you? You don’t think that Secka guy is right?”

Jeb blinked. “N-No, of course not. I was the first one to go against it!”

Keruni narrowed her eyes. “Then you have to help! I can’t just let those creatures die, Jeb, I...”

“Keruni!” Zerone’s loud, anxious voice boomed from somewhere close by, making all the fur along Jeb’s back rise up in alarm. Before he had time to run or think of what to do, the Emperor stalked forward, shoving the bushes aside and exposing their hiding place. His eyes narrowed and blazed with fury when the two of them shrunk down in front of him. “*Never* run away like that again!”

Keruni nervously flicked her tail and nodded meekly. “Sorry, I just wanted to catch up with those outlaws.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Zerone snarled with a grim, stony expression. “Let me sort out the criminals. You just get home.”

“But they don’t listen to you!” Keruni’s fur bristled in protest and her eyes widened in desperation. “We don’t even know what they’re doing and how we can stop them!” She paused, then suddenly cast a sly glance over at Jeb. “Hey, wait a minute. Jeb’s an outlaw, isn’t he?” Her eyes lit up with hope. “He could spy on them for us!”

Jeb’s eyes widened in shock. “What?”

“Oh, come on! Make yourself useful for once!” she snapped, narrowing her eyes and flicking him roughly with her tail.

He glared at her. “Hey, you should talk...”

“That’s enough, Jeben.” Zerone narrowed his eyes and let out a growl, making Jeb wince and shrink back against the ground. The Emperor took a step forward to tower over the two of them, narrowing his eyes in deep thought. An uneasy feeling spread to every inch of Jeb’s body when he noticed a gleam of interest in Zerone’s gray and green eyes.

“Jeb, considering how much you owe us...” the Emperor began.

He gaped at him in disbelief. “*Owe you?*”

“...I think perhaps Keruni is right,” he finished, giving him a dark, warning glare. “I don’t know what you’re doing out here, but you *are* going to spy on Secka and the other criminals and then report back to us to tell us what they’re doing.”

He stared at him in shock. “No way!”

Zerone narrowed his eyes. “Do it.”

Jeb shook his head in dismay, his eyes wide with disbelief. “Why me?”

“Who else would do it for me?” Zerone replied with a sharp flick of his tail. “All of the other outlaws hate me and want nothing to do with me.”

Jeb anxiously flicked his tail. “I’m not any different, Zerone.”

“Yes, well.” The Emperor let out a curt growl and gave him a cold, disdainful glare. “Perhaps it is time to see beyond your own selfishness, Jeben.”

Jeb gaped at him in disbelief, but before he could protest, the Emperor swooped down and bared his fangs in Jeb’s face, letting out a cold, dangerous snarl.

“You *will* do this for me now, Jeb. If you really believe those creatures should not be harmed, you *will* be my spy. You’re the only one on the other side I can even remotely trust or rely on. And if you don’t do this, let me remind you that if Secka was not lying and he really *will* wipe out the creatures, it will be on your conscience.”

Jeb flattened his ears, feeling a wave of guilt wash over him. “But...”

The Emperor lashed his tail and cut him off. “Do you understand me?”

He stared up at him with wide, alarmed blue and green eyes. “Y-yes, but I...”

“And you will do it.” Zerone narrowed his eyes in a threat and glared at Jeb; his words were definitely not a question.

Feeling his head whirling with confusion and alarm, Jeb let out a soft sigh, knowing he had no choice. “A-all right.”

Zerone straightened up and curled his tail neatly over his paws, his expression dark and stony. “Good. You and I will continue to meet in the normal meeting place every week, the same way we used to meet for these discussions. You will tell *no one* about this and come to meet me *alone*. You will also take every precaution to not get on Secka’s bad side so that you can continue to spy on him. That is all you have to do.”

Jeb shivered. “You sure don’t ask for much...”

Zerone simply flicked his tail and pulled himself to his paws. Turning around, he stalked out of the undergrowth and padded back in the

direction of the Court. “Keruni!” he called over his shoulder without bothering to look back.

Keruni glanced back at her father and hesitated before leaning closer to Jeb. “Jeb, I have to tell you something else. I...I just remembered...I can’t really recall much, but...Carita. I remember something about her. She was always so nice when Daddy was around, but when she was alone with me, she was so mean and evil. That’s why I was so upset when she was around, I think, and I also think she was planning something.” She paused and nervously flicked her tail. “Er...that’s all. Good luck with spying.” Giving him a quick flick of her tail, she whipped around and leapt out of the undergrowth, racing after her father with her tail waving wildly back and forth in the air.

Jeb blinked and stared after her in shock, shaking his head several times to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. Even if he was, it was more of a nightmare than a dream. Flattening his ears and shrinking down on the ground, Jeb let out a long sigh and felt his fur prickle with unease. How had he gotten himself into this one?

Hatred and distrust hung thickly in the air. Saderia and Dash followed her parents around the forest throughout the week, responding to distress calls and disasters. In every neighborhood the animals looked different, but the anger and betrayal gleaming in their tired, bloodshot eyes was the same. The gaunt, dirty animals hissed and spat at her in between raw fits of coughing and lashed out at her, but the pain hiding behind the fury in their eyes hurt worse than the cruel jeers. In their eyes, they had been stabbed in the back by their own monarchy. It would be a long time before they put their faith in them again.

By the end of the week, she felt so exhausted it was hard to look forward to visiting the Home of the Leopards. Her paws dragged on the path that led to the wide clearing and she couldn’t help but fear that some disaster might be waiting for them. To her relief, when the trees gave way in front of her, the Home of the Leopards clearing was undisturbed and filled with lively leopards. The spotted animals moved throughout the clearing, mingling with neighbors. A few weak coughs interrupted the peaceful chatter, but the animals all seemed strong and nowhere near as hostile as the others. Saderia scanned the clearing for her friends and smiled when she

spotted the skinnier, cheetah-like form of Loki and the small form of Lisa beside her. Pausing, she waved and grinned when they caught her eye and raced toward her.

“Hey, Saderia! Hey, Dash!” Loki called, darting forward with Lisa close behind.

“Hi, Loki. Hi, Lisa,” Saderia and Dash replied at the same time.

Loki skidded to a halt in front of them and grinned, giving them a playful flick of her tail. “Come to check on us? We’re fine, you know. You don’t need to worry.”

“That’s good.” Saderia let out a sigh of relief. “We just wanted to make sure.”

“How are things going around here?” Dash spoke up.

Loki shrugged. “Things are good. Your flood protection has held up really well, so there’s been no disasters and we weren’t really interested in that stuff your parents were going to give us, so we didn’t really care when it got destroyed. We’re used to not having much anyway. The other animals need to get over their selfishness and walk a mile in a leopard’s paws before complaining about not getting the latest item.”

Saderia couldn’t help but grin. “Thanks, Loki. I’m glad you’re not disappointed. None of the other animals seem to feel that way.”

She waved her thanks away with a flick of her tail. “Like I said, they need to get over themselves and be grateful for what we have. You’ve got us leopards on your side regardless of what those other animals say.”

She smiled and nodded gratefully. “Mom and Dad will be glad to hear that. They’re wearing themselves thin and the anger from the others just makes it harder.” She sighed, then looked up at Lisa and grinned. “How about you, Lisa? How are you doing?”

She shrugged. “Pretty good. Things have been okay around here. Although...there has been a bug going around. A couple of animals have gotten sick lately.”

Saderia’s eyes darkened. “Really? It’s not bad, is it?”

Lisa shook her head uncomfortably. “I doubt it. Maeta’s been looking after them, but she usually doesn’t let others see them in case it spreads. I think they’re all okay.”

Saderia nodded slowly, her eyes narrowing. “I hope so.”

Dash flicked his tail in agreement. "Me too. Hey, how are Tawny and Maeta doing? I haven't seen them around here yet."

Loki's bright green eyes suddenly grew dark and grave.

A chill spread through Saderia's body at the sudden change and the smile slipped off of her face. "Loki? Is everything okay?"

Loki hesitated uncertainly. "Well, it's probably nothing to worry about, but...Tawny's gotten a little sick lately. It's nothing major, just a little coughing, and we're sure she'll be fine, but we're just a bit worried about her."

Dash's eyes darkened. "Are you sure she'll be okay?"

Loki managed a smile. "Of course! Maeta's one of the greatest healers I know and she's working on a cure! And if Maeta can't do it, no one can. Tawny will be fine."

Saderia tried to smile, but a hint of unease lingered. "I hope she gets better."

"She will," Lisa murmured. "It's just that...well, her mother had a weak immune system too..."

"She'll be fine," Loki growled, giving Lisa a warning glare. Seeing Lisa's startled look, she let up on her glare and gave her an apologetic glance. "Sorry. But I guarantee Tawny will be up and bouncing around as usual within a week."

Lisa managed a weak smile. "Okay, you're probably right."

"I know I am. Anyway, Saderia, Dash, do you want to hang around here for a while? We hardly get to see you guys anymore."

"Sure, Loki, we can spare a few minutes," Saderia said brightly.

"Yeah, that sounds fine," Dash agreed with a smile. "What do you want to do?"

Loki shrugged. "We could just go hang out in the woods if you want. It's not as dangerous now that we've explored it more."

"Sounds good." Saderia pushed herself to her paws and padded after Loki as she led them through the clearing. Beside her, Dash jumped to his paws to follow, while Lisa staggered to her paws unsteadily. Leopards passed by them and waved with a smile as they moved through the neighborhood. Feeling surprised and grateful for the first warm welcome she had gotten in a week, Saderia waved back and smiled a genuine smile.

“So is Maeta doing well?” Saderia asked as they ducked into the forest. “She must have her paws full looking after everyone.”

Loki nodded. “She’s doing pretty good. She’s not too worried about Tawny and she seems to have everything under control.”

“Yeah, she’s...she’s fine,” Lisa agreed in a soft voice.

Saderia frowned at the sound of her breathless voice and looked back to see her take a deep, shaky breath. She blinked in surprise when she realized tiny pants were heaving out of the leopard’s throat. Her face looked oddly pale.

“Lisa?” she asked, narrowing her eyes in unease. “Are you okay?”

Lisa blinked at her in surprise. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just feel really tired, that’s all.”

Loki paused at the head of the group and looked back with a worried gleam in her green eyes. “You’ve been tired every day this week. You sure you’re okay?”

She nodded firmly, though she looked a bit dizzy. “Yes, I’m *fine*. I guess I’m just not sleeping well or something. Let’s just stop here. I’ll be fine in a minute.”

Loki narrowed her eyes and stepped closer. “You don’t look fine. No, we should get back,” she added before Lisa could protest. “Maeta should take a look at you.”

Lisa frowned and sharply flicked her tail. “I don’t need to bother Maeta. Really, I feel fine. I just need to rest for a moment.”

Loki lashed her tail and gave her a stern look. “You can do that in Maeta’s den. Come on, we’re going back to the clearing.”

“No, Loki, stop!”

Loki brushed against her to lead her back, but Lisa tried to get away. She pushed Loki away from her, then let out a cry when she started to fall back. Loki staggered away from her and watched in shock as Lisa’s paws smacked against a thick tree root and twisted the wrong way. With a flash of alarm, Saderia lunged forward to catch her, but couldn’t move fast enough. Lisa’s body twisted in the air and she fell onto the ground with a rough smack. A sharp cry stuck in the leopard’s throat and was replaced with a sick, choking sound. Her head drooped to the ground and a harsh, rough cough shuddered out of her chest. She gasped for air as coughs tore out of her throat.

“Lisa!” Loki cried, her eyes widening in horror. “What’s wrong?”

“I...don’t...know!” she choked out. Coughing violently, she struggled to push herself to her paws, then stumbled to the ground in a fit of coughing. “I can’t breathe!”

Loki started toward her, then froze. Lisa’s body shuddered with a raw, violent cough. Dark blood suddenly splattered the grassy ground in front of her.

Saderia’s eyes grew wide with shock.

“Maeta!” Loki screamed. Her wide, terrified green eyes flicked to Saderia’s face. “Stay with her!” she shouted. Without giving Saderia a second to nod, she bolted off through the trees so fast her tawny fur was nothing but a blur. Saderia’s fur rustled as she darted past and disappeared behind the colorful undergrowth around them.

Whirling around to stare at Lisa, Saderia felt her heart beat frantically with fear as she crouched down beside the leopard. “Lisa, what’s happened? Why is there blood?”

Dash sank down beside her, looking helpless and stunned as flecks of blood spilled out of her mouth and stained the grass a dark, sickening red. “Lisa, it’s okay,” he whispered desperately. “Maeta and Loki are coming. We’ll make sure you’re all right...”

He broke off and looked back for any sign of Loki. Saderia followed his gaze and felt a surge of relief when she saw a yellow blur darting back through the woods. Behind Loki raced a strong leopard with gleaming brown eyes. Loki skidded to a halt just inches away from Saderia and looked back as Maeta lunged forward and landed beside her.

“Move,” she hissed, pushing past the three of them. Narrowing her eyes, she knelt carefully beside Lisa and gently held her up. Slowly her coughs began to subside. “I...I feel...nauseous,” Lisa choked out. Her eyelids drooped and her body sagged limply in Maeta’s grasp. A thin stream of blood trickled out of her mouth as her eyes slipped shut.

Maeta’s dark eyes were grim. “Saderia, Dash, Loki, help me bring her back to the Home of the Leopards. We need to put her in the empty den with the other sick animals.”

Loki swallowed nervously and nodded. “Yes, Maeta.”

Together the four of them hoisted Lisa up and gently carried her back to the Home of the Leopards. The trees passed by them in a blur until



they faded into the wide open clearing. Leopards paused and looked up at them in shock as they darted past the dens. Their stunned gazes bored into their fur as Maeta guided them toward a tiny den on the other side of the clearing.

The dull scent of sickness wafted toward them a second before they stepped into the den. Saderia's heart skipped in her chest. Dozens of rough, makeshift beds spread out in front of them in rows all the way to the back of the hollow den. Almost every bed was occupied by a gaunt, sleeping leopard. The stench of sickness seemed to rise from their still bodies and their harsh, grating breath filled the den. Their fur was matted and dirty and their paws and tails hung limply off the rocky beds. The shock burning in Saderia's heart shone in Loki's wide, stunned green eyes as they staggered into the den. Maeta led them over to an empty bed and gently lowered Lisa down onto it. Saderia, Dash, and Loki stared at her, holding their breath and waiting for what she would say.

Maeta took a deep breath and looked up to face them with tired brown eyes. "I'm afraid that Lisa has the sickness." Loki's eyes grew wide with dismay, but Maeta continued calmly. "I will look after her, and I believe she will be fine. She will have to stay here for a while, so all of you must leave for now. I'll let you know how she's doing."

Loki opened her mouth to argue, then paused and thought better of it. Heaving a long sigh, she stared down at her paws and narrowed her eyes. "Yes, Maeta." After one last, lingering glance at Lisa, she reluctantly turned around and led the way out of the den.

"Loki?" Saderia whispered as soon as they had crept outside of the den. "Has Lisa been feeling well lately?"

Loki shook her head helplessly. "I don't know. She never complained or anything. She looked a little strange now that I think about it, but I didn't think she was ill."

"I hope she'll be okay," Dash murmured, glancing uneasily down at his paws.

"She will be," Loki hissed, her green eyes blazing. "I've already told you, Maeta is the best when it comes to healing. Lisa will be fine."

The fear and determination gleaming in Loki's green eyes was enough to make Saderia not press it, but she couldn't stop herself from worrying. Maeta was indeed one of the best at healing and if she couldn't

do it, then she highly doubted anyone else could. But what if Maeta *couldn't* do it?

# Chapter Thirteen

## Bitter Cold

“A sickness has broken out among us.” Makero steadily met the hateful glares of the animals in front of him. A tense silence hung over the clearing full of forest animals. Every eye was locked on the King and Queen and the royal family at the front of the meeting place. Anger, fear, and hopelessness tainted their stares. The thick air and the tension crackling among the forest animals made the whole scene seem numb and surreal.

“As of yet, the disease has no cure,” Makero continued in a strong, calm voice. “It is also highly contagious. Not much else is known about it, but our best healers are currently researching it more. With any luck, a cure is just around the corner.” He paused, then took a deep breath and met their dark stares. “I urge all of you to look after yourselves. Avoid any sick animals to avoid catching the disease and if you begin to feel sick yourself, please report it to a healer and to us. That is all we can do to help you right now. The Queen and I will let out know if anything else is found out about the disease.”

He broke off and stared grimly out at the forest animals. Anxious murmuring spread through the clearing. Fear and distrust burned in their eyes. Without a word from the forest animals or the King or Queen, they slowly began padding away with helplessness still evident in their listless expressions. The King and Queen stared darkly after them until the clearing was empty of anything but brown bushes and dying trees.

Saderia blinked out of her grim thoughts, but memories of the grave meeting still haunted her mind. In the week after her visit to the Home of the Leopards, she had learned that the sickness had already broken out in other neighborhoods. The meeting had been their only hope for getting the animals to stop the spread of the disease. In the days that passed since the impromptu meeting, more animals had fallen ill. The meeting had given them the facts, but without a cure, there was nothing to protect them but advice.

A frigid wind ruffled her fur and sent an icy shiver through her body. The leaves on the tree she had climbed rustled around her. Letting out a soft sigh, she peered down at the ground far below her, then turned back to peer through the brownish-green leaves of the tree. Her eyes darted back and forth as she pushed aside clumps of leaves, searching for any sign of food. Disappointment colored her gaze when she uncovered not a single apple in the usually healthy tree. After searching for a few minutes longer, she finally let out a long sigh, realizing there were no apples on the tree to find. Stifling a tinge of unease, she bunched her muscles and leapt easily back to the ground. Spinning around, she padded around the side of the tree and peered into the entrance of her den.

Sitting on the small, rocky couch were her parents. Seated around them on the floor were Dash and her aunt and uncle. The animals' distrust had finally started to affect the King and Queen, making them prefer to stay home unless a disaster struck. Cia and Uncle Jash had given up working on the warehouse after most of their builders fell ill.

Saderia looked down and slowly padded into the den. "Mom, Dad... We're going to have to find a new source of food. There's no more fruit on the tree outside."

Her family slowly looked up as she hovered uncomfortably in front of them.

"Well, it is getting colder," Uncle Jash sighed. "It must be taking a toll on the plants."

"I'll look for some," Dash murmured, standing up and padding past Saderia.

Saderia glanced back at him and tried to smile before padding over to sit on the couch beside her father. She gave him a hopeful glance. "Can we go see Lisa today?"

The King nodded. "We'll take you there. We have to check on the forest anyway."

"We'll come too," Cia spoke up.

Saderia nodded slowly. "So what do you have to do today, Mom and Dad?"

Karenisha shrugged. "Same old, same old. We're going to go around to check on all of the sick animals and make sure everything is going all right."

“I hope they get better soon,” Saderia murmured, looking down at her paws.

“I’m sure they will,” Makero assured her. “They all seem to be doing okay.”

“I just hope someone finds a cure,” Karenisha muttered. “The animals might be all right now, but it’s spreading way too fast. For every one that recovers, another falls ill.”

“I’m sure someone will find a way to cure it,” Cia said with a light shrug. “Lots of animals are working on it, after all. One of them is bound to find a herb that works.”

“We can hope,” Karenisha murmured.

Saderia started to speak, then paused and looked up when she heard soft paws thud against the rocky ground. Dash stood in the entrance to the den, holding only a tiny bit of food. Heaving a sigh, he dropped the fruit in front of them. “Sorry,” he murmured, avoiding their eyes. “I looked around, but there’s barely any food on the trees at all.”

Karenisha sighed. “It’s all right, Dash. We’ll have to ration it differently. From now on, we’ll split two apples amongst ourselves in the morning and two in the evening.”

Internally grimacing, Saderia just sighed and stared down at the fruit. Dash sliced the apples into twelve separate pieces and handed them out. Ignoring the snarling of her stomach, Saderia gulped down the tiny pieces in barely a second and stood up with the others to leave for the Home of the Leopards. It was only after they had already started off into the forest that she realized Dash had taken the smallest pieces.

“Maeta says there’s no change in her condition.” Loki looked up at Saderia, Dash and the rest of the royal family and let out a long sigh. She leaned back toward the sick den that the seven of them were standing beside. Standing in front of Loki, Saderia could see the first few beds inside the den and hear the scrape of paws on stone, but she tried not to stare. Turning back around to face them, Loki muttered, “Maeta’s determined to find a cure. She’s trying some different things...Lisa will be fine.”

“I hope you’re right,” Saderia murmured. “Can we see her?”

“Not yet. Maeta’s in there right now and she needs to concentrate.”

“When you have time to talk to Maeta, give her our good wishes,” Makero spoke up, giving Loki a slight smile. “And tell her to let us know if she finds a cure for the sickness. There were a few more cases over the week.”

Loki nodded. “Of course, King Makero.”

The King gave her a smile, then turned to lead Karenisha, Cia, and Uncle Jash out of the clearing, leaving Saderia and Dash alone. When her family had disappeared into the woods, Saderia started to speak, then broke off when something caught her eye. Around the corner of the sick den, a tiny, spotted orange face poked around the corner, looking out with curious brown eyes. After a brief hesitation, three-month-old Tawny toddled out of the den and looked around with bright eyes. Her matted tail flicked eagerly back and forth and her dull fur bristled with excitement.

Loki followed her gaze and growled. “Tawny! What are you doing out of bed?”

“Exploring,” she chirped, stifling a cough. She grinned. “Hi, S’Dera! Hi Dash!”

Loki heaved a heavy sigh, while Saderia and Dash smiled and gave her a weak wave. “Tawny, you should be resting in your den,” the cheetah growled.

“It’s boring!” she squealed, stamping her paw.

Loki rolled her eyes. “Tough. You have to get better. Now come on.” She took a step toward her, but before she could grab the tiny cub, Tawny let out a squeak and darted away from her. Loki hissed in aggravation and whirled around, but before she could give chase, Dash dove forward and grabbed her gently by her scruff before she could escape.

Loki let out a relieved sigh as Dash carried her back to them. “Thanks, Dash.”

Dash just nodded and flicked her tail, then turned and ducked into the sick den to carry her back to her bed. Saderia and Loki peered into the den to wait for him to return, then stepped back when he appeared in the entrance to the den without Tawny. He gave them a smile and crept out to join them. Saderia opened her mouth to ask him about the cub, then broke off when a strong leopard padded up to the entrance behind Dash.

“Thank you,” Maeta sighed with a tired smile at Dash. “Tawny’s always running off like that. I try to keep an eye on her, but...” She trailed

off with another heavy sigh.

“How’s Lisa doing?” Loki murmured.

Maeta let out a long breath. “There has been no change in her condition. We’ll just have to see if the medicine I gave her worked later on.”

They all let out a long sigh and nodded sadly. “Thanks, Maeta,” Loki murmured.

Maeta nodded, then turned around and padded back into the den, leaving them in silence. Saderia stared out at the clearing as the remaining animals padded listlessly back and forth, wondering how many of them might start spending the night in the sick den. Remembering Karenisha’s words, she desperately hoped Maeta would find a cure, but a dark glimmer of doubt nagged at her mind. No one said a word as they wondered what would happen next. The silence was broken by a single harsh cough from inside the den.

Sharp hisses echoed around her. Darkness closed in on her, but when she dared to peer into the gloom, Saderia could just barely make out craggy, rock walls rising up on all sides. The damp, cold air sent shivers racing down her spine and she shuddered in the pool of blackness. A biting chill surged through her as the hisses grew louder and louder. Fearful blue and green eyes flashed in the darkness, making her heart freeze in her chest. The eyes shone in front of her, then blinked shut, drowning her in a wave of darkness. The craggy walls around her swam before her eyes until she forced herself to squeeze them shut. Her heart skipped when she opened them again into a dark, still land.

Bleak nothingness spread out in front of her in all directions. A pitch black sky hovered ominously over miles of light sand and rolling dunes. Silence filled the thick air, unbroken by a wisp of wind, the rustling of tree leaves, or the thud of paws. Saderia’s breath caught in her throat and she started to take a step forward, then froze. A lone howl rose in the air, echoing around her and raising the fur along her back. She looked around desperately for the source of the howl, but the scene began to fade in front of her. She let out a cry as she was swallowed up by the dark sky and the howl faded into the blackness.

Her heart beat frantically, then froze when the darkness melted away. The gloom remained thick, but she could just make out a dark brown figure lying in front of her, a million miles away. His dark fur heaved with every breath while she stood frozen. Slowly the darkness crept back toward her, but the scene stayed clear. The lion faded instead.

Her eyes flew open. Gasping for breath, she flung herself upward and looked around wildly, her chest heaving rapidly up and down. Sweat and tears drenched her face.

“Saderia, what’s wrong?”

Her breath caught and she whipped around in alarm. Dash stared at her in shock, his amber eyes wide with concern. Her chest heaved with shaky pants. “Wh-what...”

Dash gently reached out and held her paw with his before she could speak. His worried eyes bored into hers. “Are you okay?”

Saderia stared shakily up at him, her mind whirling with fear. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she slowly looked around at the dark, rocky room. She glanced down at the hard bed beneath her and the blankets piled on top of her, then peered out into the main room of the den where the moon cast a beam of light across the floor. Everything seemed normal and unchanged, but the cold fear in her heart refused to melt away.

A chilly wind rustled through the house, making her shiver. “I’m fine.”

Dash frowned and wrapped his paw tighter around hers. “Are you sure?”

She nodded shakily. Her breath caught as her Dream flickered through her mind, but she forced the thought away. “I’m sure. I just...had a horrible nightmare.”

His eyes darkened. “You mean you had a Dream?”

Fear seared her chest and she desperately shook her head. “No,” she choked out. “No, it wasn’t a Dream. It can’t be a Dream. It will *never* come true.”

He blinked in shock. “Saderia, what did you see? What’s going to happen?”

Tears pricked her eyes. “Nothing’s going to happen! Dreams aren’t real! I don’t believe in them!” She shook her head. “They can’t be real. It



was just a nightmare.”

Dash watched her for a long moment. “All right. Do you want to talk about it?”

She shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut. “No. It doesn’t matter anyway. It’s just a nightmare. One that can’t come true.” She tried to push away her shakiness and took a deep, trembling breath. Pressing closer to Dash, she pushed the memory of the dream away and tried to forget it. She didn’t believe in Dreams. They couldn’t be real.

Dash gave her a comforting smile and carefully pulled the blanket up to her chest. “If you really don’t want to talk about it, then just try to relax. It’s still late and you need your sleep. I’m right here to watch out for you.”

She nodded slowly, her breathing starting to return to normal and her fear beginning to fade away. “Yeah,” she murmured. “I guess you are.” She hesitated, then looked up and darkly met his stare. “Stay that way.”

Dash blinked in confusion, then shrugged. “I will. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good,” she murmured, looking away.

Dash gave her a weak smile and carefully laid her down on the bed. “Don’t worry about your dream and just try to get back to sleep, Saderia. Everything’s fine and I’ll be here to make sure nothing bad happens. Just close your eyes. Everything will be okay.”

She hesitated, then managed to return his weak smile. Taking a deep breath, she laid back in the bed and rolled over to look out into the main room where the light of the moon shone through the gloom. Behind her, she felt Dash put a paw comfortingly on her shoulder and let out a shaky breath. Inching closer to Dash, she rested her head back against the bed and tried not to shiver with fear or cold. Taking another deep breath, she slowly closed her eyes in the silence and gloom of the night but didn’t dare go to sleep.

Memories of her nightmare still lingered by the time morning light began spreading out over the forest, but the warm glow of the sun managed to wipe away the fear it had inspired. Trying not to notice the tiredness plaguing her every step, she looked up at the woods around her and paused on the edge of the Home of the Leopards. Glancing around, she

instinctively looked past the leopards milling around in the clearing and faced the sick den. Loki sat outside the den—the same as every day—but Saderia felt a jolt of surprise when she recognized the lioness and panther sitting close beside her.

“What are Lizzie and Lily doing here?” she murmured.

Dash looked up at them and let out a soft sigh. “They probably heard about Lisa.”

Saderia glanced toward them and nodded before bounding off in their direction with Dash close behind her, her heart stinging with sympathy. “Loki?”

Loki looked up at the sound of her voice and gave a weak smile, waving them over. “Hey, Saderia. Hey, Dash,” she murmured when they stopped in front of her.

Saderia smiled while Dash gave her a friendly wave. Glancing over at the others, Saderia cautiously gave them a smile. “Hi, Lizzie. Hi, Lily.”

Lizzie managed a weak smile. “Hi, Saderia. Dash.”

Dash smiled and waved to her while Lily echoed Lizzie’s greeting. Saderia glanced over at them and couldn’t help but notice how Lizzie kept her tail tucked self-consciously behind her back. She abruptly turned away and tried not to stare at what was left of her tail after it had been mostly cut off by a hunter trap in their old forest.

“Are you here about Lisa?” she asked softly.

“Yeah,” Lizzie murmured. “We heard a while ago. How exactly is she, Loki?”

“She’s still hanging in there,” Loki muttered. “But she’s worse. More animals have taken ill.” Saderia’s heart sank. Loki paused and gestured to the den. “You can see Lisa if you want. I was about to go check on her since I just finished looking for food.”

“Food’s scarce lately,” Lily murmured, glancing darkly down at her paws.

Saderia looked up in surprise. “You’re running out of food, too?”

When they both nodded, Saderia felt her heart skip a beat. Trying to ignore a sudden sense of worry, she turned toward the sick den to follow Loki inside. The overwhelming stench of sickness rolled over her in a wave of rancid air when she set foot in the den. Beside her, she saw Lizzie curl her lip in disgust and Lily cover her nose with a grimace. Rows of occupied

beds spread out in front of them. Some of the leopards waved and gave them a weak smile when they passed by and Saderia made sure to smile back and walk quietly to avoid disturbing the ones who were asleep. At the back of the den, Lisa was lying on a tiny bed. The five of them stopped just in front of her.

Lisa looked up in surprise at her five visitors. Her orange, spotted fur was matted and tangled and her eyes were dull and bloodshot, but her irises still held a tiny gleam. She blinked several times and shyly looked away. "Um, hi, everybody..."

Lizzie narrowed her eyes. "Lisa, are you going to be okay? I'm sick of worrying."

Lisa blinked. "Um...I guess so."

"How do you feel?" Dash asked a bit more sensitively.

She shrugged and glanced down at her paws. "Fine, I guess. I can't really breathe well and I always have a headache, but it's not that bad."

"You better get well soon," Loki teased.

Lisa managed to smile. "I'll try, Loki."

Saderia gave her a tight smile and noticed a tiny bit of fruit on the floor beside her bed. "Are you hungry?" she asked. "Shouldn't you keep your strength up?"

Lisa glanced down and shrugged. "I guess so. I haven't eaten for a while, that's for sure." She started to lean over to get it, but Dash instantly darted forward and picked it up for her. Lisa gave him a grateful smile as he leaned over her bed and gently placed the fruit in her paws. Smiling, Lisa opened her mouth to thank him, but broke off in a rough fit of coughing. Dash instantly moved closer to hold her still as she shook with coughs.

Clamping a paw over her mouth, she choked back another sneeze. "I'm so sorry, Dash," she choked out, looking embarrassed and horrified.

"It's all right," Dash said with a smile as he sat back. "Just eat and get better."

"Do I need to get Maeta?" Loki demanded, her worried gaze locked on Lisa.

Lisa shook her head. "No, Loki, I'm fine. You don't need to find Maeta."

Loki hesitated for a long moment, then reluctantly sat back and nodded.

Lisa smiled, then delicately began to nibble on the fruit. Seeing everyone's scared faces, she managed a weak smile. "Relax, everyone. I'll be okay. I promise."

Soft murmuring reached Saderia's ears when she broke out of the woods and padded over to her den. Frowning, she exchanged an uneasy glance with Dash, then carefully crept toward the den. The quiet sound of muttering grew louder and louder until she peered around the corner of the den to see what was going on inside.

Karenisha, Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash were huddled in a tight circle, whispering anxiously to each other. Saderia listened intently, but no matter how hard she listened, she couldn't pick out any words in their tense, grim voices. Inching closer, she froze when her paw crushed a twig with a loud, booming snap. All eyes turned to her and Dash.

Embarrassment burned her fur. "Mom, Dad, I-I'm sorry—"

"It's okay, Saderia," the Queen murmured tensely. "Come inside."

Saderia narrowed her eyes and nervously stepped inside. "What's going on?"

"We have some news about the sickness," Makero muttered. "It's not good news."

A dark feeling of unease spread through Saderia's body. "What happened?"

"You don't need to know that," Karenisha muttered. "How was Lisa?"

"Good." Saderia shifted uncomfortably. "What's this about?"

"It's about the forest." The Queen took a deep breath. "It's dangerous out there, especially with what we've just heard. It's too dangerous to be near a sick animal."

Saderia blinked in shock. "But Lisa—"

"You have to stop visiting," Karenisha said firmly. "It puts you at too much risk."

Saderia gaped in dismay. "What? But I have to visit her to see how she's doing!"

The Queen narrowed her eyes. "It's too dangerous."

Saderia stared at her in disbelief. "Why?"

“You don’t need to know why,” she growled, a shadow flitting across her face.

“But—”

“No buts.” Her mother’s stern amber eyes burned into hers. “I can’t let you put yourself at risk. You’re not going. Period. Now both of you get to your rooms. From now on, neither of you are allowed to leave the den without our permission. And that’s final.”

Moonlight shimmered down from the hole in the ceiling, lighting up the wide, empty basin in the center of the Spring. Soft, indistinguishable voices echoed from inside the rocky dip in the ground, making shivers of unease race up Jeb’s spine. Jeb stood in the shadows hiding the entrance to his cave den, trying to keep out of sight. Weeks had passed by since his uncomfortable conversation with Zerone and Keruni and he had done his best to try to forget it had happened. No matter how hard he tried, though, Zerone’s words lingered in his head, nagging at him to do what the Emperor had said.

Peering out into the Spring, he could just see a few faces of the outlaws at the bottom of the basin. He could just make out a splash of gray fur against the dull, dark rocks. Part of him longed to help the Emperor stop Secka, but the thought of trying to spy on the gray kraguer was nerve-racking. Another part of him wanted to ignore the Emperor and his annoying affairs. Who did Zerone think he was anyway, saying Jeb ‘owed’ him? If anything, the Emperor owed him for getting him into this mess. Trying to shake off the thoughts, he let out a soft sigh and faced the empty basin, knowing he had no other choice but to try to help Zerone, even if he didn’t like it.

Jeb looked back to see his parents sleeping soundly in the dark cave den. Turning around, he took a deep breath, then silently slunk out of the den. Crouching down so that his white belly brushed the freezing stone floor, he crept toward the Spring basin and stopped just a few paces away. He silently cursed his yellow fur when he realized if he got any closer, the vibrant color would give him away. Leaning forward, he tried to hear what the kraguers were saying, but from where he sat, he couldn’t catch every word.

Secka sat at the bottom of the basin with his tail curled neatly over his paws. In front of him stood a crowd of his more loyal followers, watching him closely. Pricking his ears, Jeb struggled to listen to their quiet, muttering voices to hear what they were talking about, but he could only catch a few words that Secka was saying.

“...keep stealing...yeah, the creatures...and Zerone won’t...” A tiny laugh drifted over to Jeb’s ears. “...all for ourselves...”

One of the outlaws muttered something that Jeb couldn’t catch.

Secka snorted, then growled something back. When Jeb inched forward to listen, he could still only pick out a few rough words. “...thinks I’m out to get the creatures...out to get *him*...just a distraction...” He paused, then let out a loud, cold growl. “When this is done, Zerone will be gone!”

Jeb’s eyes widened in shock and he pricked his ears, listening more intently. A twinge of worry and unease suddenly crept down his spine. What did Secka mean Zerone would be gone when he was done tormenting the creatures? His blue and green eyes gleamed with curiosity and unease and he inched closer, his heart pounding with wonder.

“But what about...?” The voice of one of the outlaws trailed off.

Secka let out a soft sigh. “...think of something...get rid of...”

*“Hey, I see someone up there!”*

One of the outlaw’s voices suddenly boomed out of the basin, cutting Secka off. Jeb whipped his head up in alarm, feeling his heart skip. Whirling around, he lunged forward to race back to his den, then let out a shriek of terror when something smacked into him, pushing him to the ground and pinning him down.

Fear spread to every inch of Jeb’s body and his heart stopped when he heard a low growl above him. Sharp claws dug into his shoulders, making him wince in pain. Tears of alarm pricked his eyes and he fought frantically to get away, his whole body feeling cold with panic. Would the kraguer actually kill him? Just when he started to feel faint, the claws retracted and the growl died away into silence. After a tiny hesitation, the outlaw stepped off him and pulled him to his paws. Jeb let out a tiny squeak when the outlaw whirled him around to face him, then froze, not sure whether to feel terrified or relieved.

“Jeb?” Secka frowned in confusion. “Huh. I expected your father.”

Shrinking down against the ground, Jeb shivered, his eyes still wide with alarm.

Secka studied him for a long moment with a curious, thoughtful expression. "What are you doing out here?"

"Wh-what are you?" Jeb choked out, trembling on the cold ground.

Secka raised an eyebrow. "That's hardly any of your business. But then, I guess what you're doing out here is none of my business either. Let's just say you were going to the upper world to get some fruit."

Jeb blinked in confusion. "Wh-what?"

"You were going up to get some fruit, Jeben," Secka repeated with a cold glint in his eyes. "You just got here a few moments ago and you didn't hear anything we said."

"But..."

"That's our little story, Jeben." Secka's eyes narrowed in warning. "The criminals down there don't like to be eavesdropped on and if they find out that's what you were doing, by the time your parents hear you screaming, there won't be much left of you."

Jeb shivered at his words, his heart beating so frantically he could barely feel it.

"But there's another problem," Secka went on, calmly flexing his claws. "I don't like being spied on either. So now we can make a deal. Do you want to live, Jeb?"

Shaking with fear and feeling his eyes widen in horror, he nodded meekly.

"Good." Secka glanced over his shoulder at the outlaws waiting in the basin, then looked back at Jeb with dark, curious gray eyes. "For some reason, you seem very comfortable with Zerone lately. I don't know why, nor do I care, but my deal is this: I will let you live if you spy on Zerone." Jeb's eyes widened in horror as he growled, "I want to know everything he's up to. And if you disagree or betray me, that's it, Jeben."

Jeb stared at him in shock and disbelief. "Sp-spy? On Zerone?"

"Yes." Secka flicked his tail in annoyance. "I doubt you'll be able to get much out of him, but his daughter seems to be opening up to you more. Between the two of them, you should be able to dig up enough information to stay alive. Do you understand, Jeb?"

Jeb shook his head desperately, his paws going numb with dismay. "But...I..."

"Do you understand, *Jeb*?" Secka repeated, narrowing his eyes in a threat. "Or would my claws help it sink in better?"

A wave of cold fear crashed over him, making his whole body feel weak with terror. Trying to choke back a protest, he gave a weak nod. "I...I understand."

"Good." Without another word, Secka shoved him toward the basin.

Letting out a cry of terror, Jeb staggered forward and tumbled down the rocks to the bottom of the drained spring. His heart stopped when he collapsed in a puddle of green slime and fuzzy mold at the very bottom. Wincing in pain, he shakily lifted his head and froze. The outlaws at the bottom of the basin jumped up in surprise and glared at him with dark, furious eyes.

"What are you doing here?" one snarled, taking a threatening step toward him.

Jeb's eyes widened in horror and he desperately tried to scabble backwards to escape, but before the criminals could attack him, Secka strolled calmly down the side of the basin. Pushing past Jeb, he stood in the center of the outlaws and nonchalantly flicked his tail. "Don't mind him. Jeb just has a knack for walking into things he shouldn't. He was just going up to get fruit, so let him go. It's not like he heard anything important."

The outlaws hesitated before reluctantly stepping aside to let Jeb through.

Secka leaned close to him and let out a threatening growl as Jeb shakily passed the criminals. "Remember our little talk, Jeb."

Jeb's mind whirled with thoughts of everything that had happened to him as he crashed through the woods, desperate to get away. Memories of the horrifying images he had conjured of the huge creatures flickered past his eyes. The idea of the threatening animals roaming in his forest still sent a shiver of fear racing through him, but after everything else that had happened, they didn't seem to be quite so terrifying. The creatures were smarter than he had thought. They seemed strong, but not cruel. Jeb had even started to wonder if he and the kraguers were the weird ones instead of the creatures.



Pushing away thoughts of the creatures, he couldn't help but feel a pang of fear when his mind drifted to Zerone and Keruni. It wasn't long ago that Zerone had ruined his life and sent him to the Spring to live like vermin because of a crime the Emperor himself had committed. Or at least that was what Jeb had originally thought. After all that had happened, he wasn't sure if the story he had always believed was true. He narrowed his eyes when he thought about Keruni and nearly winced with pain and regret. What exactly was her part in the mess? And why had she gone from stuck-up Empress-to-be to merciful ally? Somehow it was much easier to hate Zerone without Keruni around.

Trying to block out thoughts of Keruni, a sudden wave of cold washed over him. Something eerie was happening in the underground Spring and Secka seemed to be at the heart of it. A few months ago, Secka had been almost like his friend. Within such a short time, he had become a cold, scheming animal rather than the bored, apathetic ally he had known before. Somehow Secka hadn't seemed anywhere near as evil as he seemed now. Jeb had never seen him care enough about anything to be evil. A shiver of dread raced down Jeb's spine when he thought about the eerie hints he had dropped. The way he turned the outlaws into followers in a fight to kill the creatures terrified him, but sometimes it seemed as if he wasn't trying to hurt the creatures at all. Sometimes it seemed as if he was more intent on hurting someone else...

Jeb's mind whirled with confusion when he thought about everything that had happened with Secka, Zerone, and Keruni. How exactly had he gotten himself caught up in the middle of their situation anyway? The two sides that hated each other the most both seemed to want his help and he had no idea which side was better and which was worse. No matter who was the good guy and who was the bad guy in the situation, both sides would turn on him in an instant to save themselves. Everyone was in it for themselves.

Jeb heaved a long sigh and slowly pushed past a bush, feeling his fear begin to fade away. Turning around, he stopped and started to return to the Spring, then froze when a cold voice suddenly rose up from the dark undergrowth.

"Jeb! I've been looking for you."

“Leave me alone!” he exclaimed, lashing his tail and whirling around in disbelief.

Zerone pushed his way out of the bushes on the edge of the clearing and stalked forward to stand in front of him with a dark, stony expression. “I’m afraid I can’t do that,” he growled. “Now tell me what you have found out.”

“I don’t know anything!” Jeb exclaimed, bristling in the cold air. “I tried to listen in on Secka’s conversation, but I didn’t hear what they were saying. Just something about how they’re going to keep stealing something, maybe the food...”

Zerone heaved a long, exasperated sigh. “You’re useless.” Turning away from him, he started pacing stiffly back and forth in the space in front of Jeb, lashing his tail furiously back and forth. Watching him closely, Jeb slowly started to slink backwards, then froze when Zerone whirled around to face him with blazing gray and green eyes. “Whose side are you on, Jeb? It’s about time you made a choice!”

“I don’t *know*!” he cried out. “Can’t I just be neutral?”

“No.” Zerone gritted his teeth and glared at him. “You need to...”

“Leave him alone, Daddy.”

Zerone and Jeb looked up at the sound of the light, prim voice to see Keruni slip out from within the dense bushes surrounding the clearing. Her calm green eyes flicked from Zerone to Jeb. “Jeb will pick a side eventually. You’re just scaring him off now.”

Zerone blinked at her in surprise. “Keruni? I thought you were back at the Court!”

“I followed you,” she replied with an indifferent shrug. Narrowing her eyes, she faced her father with a hard, convincing glare.

Zerone hesitated for a long moment, then finally let out a long sigh. “All right. I’ll leave him alone for now.” Giving Jeb one last hostile glare and narrowing his eyes, the Emperor reluctantly turned around and stalked away through the undergrowth. A moment later, he disappeared into the shadows of the woods.

Keruni looked up at Jeb and frowned when her father had disappeared. Jeb hesitated, then slowly stepped toward her and managed a grateful smile. “Thanks.”

To his surprise, she glared at him in disgust. “I didn’t do it for *your* benefit!” She curled her lip in disdain, then whipped around and trailed after her father. She flicked her tail at him and didn’t bother to look back as she headed toward the dense bushes.

Jeb blinked and stared at her in disbelief. “Why are you so confusing?” he called.

Keruni sniffed and looked back with raised eyebrows. “Why are you so *confused*?”

# Chapter Fourteen

## Rougher Side of Royalty

Wind rustled softly outside the quiet den. Leaves danced on the breeze in the outdoor world just out of sight, crashing up against the rough, cool walls of the den. Saderia laid silently on the rocky bed, staring dully out at the main room of the den with bloodshot eyes, picturing the calm movement of the forest just outside. Her eyes followed the patterns the trees cast on the single beam of moonlight draped across the floor.

Two weeks had dragged by without so much of a glimpse of the world beyond her home. The small view of the woods outside of her den seemed like a lifeless picture framed by the craggy hole of the entrance. Her eyes had grown tired of staring at the rocky floor during the day while her parents whispered about more sick animals and she had grown sick of eyeing the dark wall at night while trying to avoid falling asleep.

Her parents were rarely home, but Cia and Uncle Jash stayed behind to make sure they never left. Her parents' eyes were dull and their fur hung limply from their skinny bodies whenever she saw them. She hadn't spoken to them in days. Whenever they returned, they spoke with Cia and Uncle Jash and lowered their voices. The only bits of conversation she could catch were statistics. Twenty more sick. Thirty seeking treatment. Forty reported ill. Fifty, sixty, seventy more in the sick dens. Everyone hoping for a cure.

After weeks of being trapped inside the house, Saderia couldn't tell just how bad the sickness had gotten. She had an image stuck in her mind of Lisa sleeping uncomfortably on the sickbed with only a few minor symptoms bugging her. The same image remained firm in her mind whenever she heard about a new group of sick animals. Whenever she heard reports of more that had fallen ill, all she could imagine were tired-looking animals lying peacefully on a bed, patiently waiting to recover. A disease just didn't seem too life-threatening after she had faced Dastarius, Lolista, hunters, dingoes, snakes, and the continuous disasters that afflicted the forest. The word 'epidemic' had been tossed around in her parents'

whispered conversations, but apart from a few common maladies like headaches and stomachaches, the disease didn't seem so bad. It spread like wildfire, but so far all it seemed to do was induce a few minor annoyances.

Blinking rapidly to keep her eyelids from drooping, Saderia let out a long sigh and sat up. Ignoring the cold chill in the air, she pushed herself out of the bed, being careful not to wake up Dash, who was lying beside her. The cold ground sent shivers jolting through her paws, but she ignored the chill and carefully padded out of the room.

A blast of cold air met her the instant she started toward the entrance of the den. The cool, prickly grass stung her paws like tiny shards of ice when she stepped past the entrance and crept outside. Wind lifted her fur up on her back and twirled it back and forth, sending chills racing through her body. It had been days since Saderia had been outside. She had almost forgotten how peaceful it felt to be out at night when the darkness hid the strange, alien colors of the plants and made it seem normal.

Saderia gazed up at the moon and sighed. What was happening beyond her home? How close had the cure come to becoming reality? How was everyone holding up?

She sighed again and started to return to her room, then paused. Quiet whispers sounded from somewhere nearby. Frowning, Saderia glanced back at the den to see if Cia and Uncle Jash were there and jumped when she saw Dash standing in the entrance. He opened his mouth to speak, then paused when Saderia shushed him. He watched her closely through bloodshot eyes as she peered in all directions for the source of the voice. At a gesture from Saderia, he staggered unsteadily forward, shivering with cold. Ignoring the chill, Saderia crept toward the sound of the voices while Dash stumbled after her.

She crept carefully around the side of the house, then froze and ducked down when she spotted her family sitting just a few feet away. The four of them were huddled in a tight circle to ward off the cold. She blinked in confusion. When had Karenisha and Makero gotten home and what were Cia and Uncle Jash doing outside?

Shuddering violently, Dash crept up to Saderia. His eyes widened when he saw the four of them sitting just a few feet away. "Saderia, we should leave..."

"Shh," she hissed, ignoring him and straining her ears to hear them.

Dash shivered, pressing closer to her for warmth and silently urging her to leave.

“Over a hundred cases of sickness in one week.” Karenisha’s troubled voice suddenly floated over to them.

Saderia pricked her ears and listened intently. Over a hundred animals were sick?

“The disease is spreading way too fast,” Makero muttered. “The number of sick animals has doubled in just days and the number keeps climbing. Nothing seems to stop it. We’ve tried to keep the sick away from the healthy, but it’s not working at all.”

Cia shivered. “And nobody’s found a cure for it?”

Karenisha heaved a sigh. “No. There are tons of animals working on finding one, but no matter what they do, the disease either stays the same or gets worse.”

“Karenisha...” Uncle Jash paused with a tortured look. “Have there been deaths?”

She sighed. “Yes. More than there should be. Way more than I’d like to count.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in shock. “*What?*” she whispered. She started to move forward, but she stopped when Dash grabbed her paw and held her back, giving her a warning look. Hardly daring to breathe, she huddled close to his shivering form and watched in disbelief. *Deaths*. How could there be deaths? How many had died?

Makero frowned. “This is bad. We had sickness before, but this is worse.”

“Everyone’s been weakened by the move to this forest and other things,” Karenisha murmured. “It’s like what happened to Marlina. They can only take so much.”

Cia’s eyes widened. “If only there was some way to stop it from spreading!”

Karenisha stared dully off into the distance. “If only.”

“There’s not much we can do anymore,” Makero muttered. “The disease will run its course. All we can do is hope the kingdom pulls through.”

The others looked gravely down at their paws.

“I suppose,” Cia murmured. “Now come on. Let’s get out of this cold.”

Saderia stood frozen in place as they started to turn around. Only when Dash gave a sharp tug on her paw did she return to reality. Jumping to her paws in alarm, she whirled around and darted toward the den with Dash close behind her. Her heart pounded frantically in her chest as she skidded on the floor of the den and raced into Dash’s room. Dash ran after her, stopping only when they had leapt up onto the bed and dove under the blankets. Shivering, they listened intently as Karenisha, Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash stepped into the den behind them. Saderia pricked her ears and only began to relax when she heard the thud of their paw steps fade away into their rooms. When she was sure they were out of sight, she slowly poked her head out from underneath the blanket and tried to relax. But no matter how hard she tried to calm down, her heart wouldn’t slow.

She let out a shaky breath, feeling suddenly numb with disbelief. “Dash...”

Suppressing a shiver, Dash slowly looked up and faced her with dark amber eyes.

“Animals have...died?” she choked out after a long moment of silence.

Dash looked away with a shadowed look. “We shouldn’t have listened in.”

Her heart skipped. “You’ve heard them talk about this? About animals...dying?”

He heaved a long sigh. “Saderia, it’s an epidemic.”

A cold chill raced down her spine. “What does that mean? It was an epidemic before it was declared one and everyone seemed fine then.”

“That was two weeks ago,” Dash muttered. “And you only saw Lisa.”

She shook her head desperately. “What are you getting at? What does that *mean*?”

“It means the disease is deadly,” he muttered, his eyes glinting. “And there’s no cure. And at the rate it’s spreading, there might be nothing we can do to stop it.”

She stared at him with wide, horrified amber eyes. “But...but everything seemed fine just two weeks ago. When did this happen?”

He heaved a sigh and shrugged listlessly. "It's been happening everywhere out there for the past few days. We just don't see it." He hesitated, then stared down at his paws. "I heard Karenisha and Makero talking about it before. I didn't want you to know."

Saderia slowly looked at her paws, feeling numb with shock. "How could it have gotten so bad? How..." She broke off and shook her head. "What's happening out there?"

Dash looked away. "I don't know, Saderia. But there's nothing we can do. We don't have a cure and we don't know what to do any more than anyone else." A breeze whipped through the room, making him shake with cold. Gritting his teeth, he shakily pulled her under the blanket. "We should get some sleep," he murmured. Opening his eyes, he met her gaze, suddenly seeming exhausted. "Maybe it will be better tomorrow."

"Yeah, sure," she muttered, gazing lifelessly out into the den. "Tomorrow."

He gave her a weak smile, then let his eyes slip shut. His head sagged back against the rocky bed and in barely a second, he had already teetered into unconsciousness.

Saderia's eyes stayed open. How had the minor annoyances caused by the disease turned into deaths? She tried to picture the sick animals in her mind, but couldn't shake the image of Lisa resting peacefully on her bed. Tears pricked her eyes. She couldn't wrap her mind around it. *How* were they dying? What had the disease turned into over the past few days? After being sealed away in her home for two weeks, she hadn't been able to see what was happening. It was as if the world had flipped over night. *How?* The question repeated in her mind. She had to know what was happening. She had to see for herself.

Sitting up, she gritted her teeth in determination. Slowly she pushed back the blanket and jumped down to the ground, being careful not to wake up Dash. Staying silent, she padded out of the room and faced the entrance of the den. Taking a deep breath, she bunched her muscles and took off running as fast as she could, never once daring to stop or look back and see the den disappear in the undergrowth behind her.

The nauseating tang of sickness rose in the air, forcing Saderia to skid to a halt. The rank stench of illness lingered in the thick woods around



her like a cloud of smoke. She crinkled her nose, but the odor wafted over her like a wave. Crinkling her nose and trying not to gag, she darted past the dense trees. Dead leaves shuddered off the trees while the trunks hunched over, their branches drooping. Her eyes began to water and her heart beat faster when the smell grew stronger.

At last she broke out of the trees and skidded to a halt on a hill overlooking a small clearing—the cougars' neighborhood. Tiny rock dens spread out in front of her, but the clearing was lifeless. Sparse brown stalks of dead grass carpeted the ground. The dens were silent. Nobody peeked out. Nobody whispered in the silence. Nothing moved.

Holding her breath and ignoring the fearful pounding of her heart, she looked around wildly, not knowing what she was looking for. Her eyes landed on the gaping mouth of a large, rocky den sitting close to the woods. She hesitated for a long moment, then carefully picked her way down the hill. A feeling of dread burned in her chest as she climbed downward, warning her away from what she was about to see. Ignoring the feeling, she slowly snuck over to the den and poked her head around to look inside.

Instantly she drew back, just barely suppressing a cry of horror. The disgusting stench was overwhelming. It rolled over her in waves as a shudder of dismay and shock shivered through her body. She stayed frozen to the spot in horror, staring into the sick den as sickness churned in her own stomach. Tight rows filled with dozens of beds squished up against each other took up almost every inch of the den, leaving barely any room to walk. Cougars slept fitfully side by side so that it was impossible to see where one bed ended and the other began. Their dull tan fur hung limply off their bodies and their tails dangled lifelessly off the ends of the beds. Hoarse, unsteady breathing filled the den, broken by a rough fit of coughing. The cougars twisted and groaned in their sleep, rolling into each other and wincing as the rough ridges of the beds dug into their bony bodies.

Saderia's amber eyes stretched wide with horror and her legs shook under her. When had it gotten this bad? Tears burned her eyes. Using every bit of strength she had left, she staggered away from the den, but her eyes remained locked on the sick animals suffering inside. Stumbling backward, she made herself turn away from the horrifying scene and raced back up the hill. She froze at the top and whipped back around to stare at the dead

neighborhood, her heart pounding wildly and her eyes streaming with tears. When had it become this nightmare? Had all of this really happened in only two weeks?

She tried to stumble away from the horrid scene, but her paws remained locked in place. Shaking her head miserably, she started to sink to the ground, then jumped with a sharp cry of alarm at the sound of a long sigh behind her.

“Must you always sneak out?”

She whirled around in alarm and gaped in shock. “What are you doing here?”

Dash narrowed his eyes and sat back by a clump of bushes. “Do you really think I’m that stupid? At this point in our lives, I know when you’re up to something.”

She tried to snap back at him, but the hiss died away in her throat. Shivering in a cold wind, she stared at the ground and tried to fight back tears. “I just want to go home.”

Dash flicked his tail. “Start moving. You’re lucky I’m going to keep this secret.”

She winced. “I’m sorry I came. I never want to see something like that again.”

“Yeah, well, try seeing that every day,” Dash muttered, rubbing his eyes drowsily.

She squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m a horrible daughter, aren’t I?”

Dash let out a long sigh. “No. You’re just too curious for your own good. But you need to go home now that you saw what you wanted to see. And don’t leave again.”

She hung her head and nodded miserably. Dash watched her for a long moment, then carefully brushed up against her to guide her away. Falling into step behind him, she kept her eyes locked on the leafy ground and let her tail drag listlessly behind her, carving a trail through the ocean of dead leaves. Dash’s amber eyes burned into her skin and she turned away from his dark, stony gaze. Cold silence spread out between them. Her whole body felt as cold as ice when she remembered the horrible sight in the cougars’ neighborhood. The putrid scent of illness lingered in the air around her, swirling around her nose and clinging to her dirty fur. Were all of the neighborhoods as bad as that?

Dash glanced at her with tired eyes and gently wrapped his tail around hers. He smiled when she looked up at him. She tried to return the weak smile, but it didn't match her eyes. Dash started to say something, then stumbled forward and broke off. His smile wavered as he caught himself and pushed himself up on shaking legs. Saderia blinked and an uneasy feeling suddenly slunk up her spine. Something was wrong. Staring intently at Dash, she realized for the first time how dull his fur had gotten and how his ribs poked out of his dirty sides. His whole body seemed to droop with every step and exhaustion dulled his amber eyes. His eyelids slipped, as if he was forcing himself to stay awake. His dark brown fur bristled around him, trying desperately to keep him safe from the biting cold.

Saderia opened her mouth to say something, then froze. A freezing wind whipped through the woods, making the trees groan and cry out in protest and sending a shower of dead leaves down onto their backs. She braced herself against the wind, but when she turned toward Dash, she had just enough time to see his eyes grow wide with alarm before he staggered onto the ground like a frail leaf caught in the wind. His fur rose up around him as the wind swept through the woods, pinning him to the ground.

"Dash!" she shouted, racing forward as wind swirled around her. In front of her, Dash struggled to push himself back up, then fell back to the ground with a weak cry of pain. A hoarse cough shuddered out of his throat the instant he smacked the ground.

Alarm seared Saderia's pounding heart as she crouched beside him. A wave of panic set her heart on fire when she saw him huddled against the ground, trapped in a rough, uncontrollable fit of coughing. "Dash! Dash! What's wrong?" she screamed, feeling frightened tears sting her eyes. Sickly memories of the frail cougars lying splayed out in the sick den burned in her mind. "Dash! What's going on? Dash! *Dash!*"

"Saderia...calm down," he choked out, struggling to fight another fit of coughing.

"No!" she exclaimed. "Dash, what's wrong?"

"I'm fine!" he coughed. "Get...K-Karenisha and..."

Her eyes widened in panic. "No, I can't leave you! I won't...!"

"Do it," he growled, his helpless eyes catching hers.

She stared back in horror. After what seemed like an eternity, she swallowed her fear and nodded. Stumbling away, she took a deep breath and tore through the woods as fast as she could, hearing Dash's painful coughing fade into the darkness behind her. Tears trembled on her eyelids as she forced herself to run. The dying woods around her faded into a dark blur and she barely noticed the skeletal branches ripping at her fur. She couldn't even feel her paws touching the ground. All she could think about was Dash lying in the woods all alone. Lunging forward, she burst out of the woods and into her den. Standing outside Dash's room, her family whirled around in shock.

"Saderia!" Karenisha exclaimed. "Where have you been?"

Covered in dirt and blood, she shook her head frantically and felt tears streak through her matted fur. "Something's wrong with Dash! You have to help him! Please!"

The Queen frowned in confusion, but shook it off. "Show us what's wrong."

Shaking fearfully in the entrance, Saderia whipped around and dove back into the woods. Paw steps thundered behind her as she led the way, weaving in and out of trees without knowing where she was going. Her paws carried her across the wilted forest floor as if they knew the way back to her friend. Ducking around a wide tree, she picked up the faint sound of coughing somewhere in the distance. Running faster, she broke through the undergrowth and skidded to a halt in the tiny clearing where her friend lay on the ground. Karenisha, Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash crashed into the clearing right behind her.

Understanding dawned in her parents' eyes as they crouched down beside Dash.

Dash looked up at them with a faint glimmer of hope. "Karenisha? Makero?"

"It's okay, Dash," Karenisha said tensely. "Just try to relax." She glanced at Cia and Uncle Jash. "As soon as he stops coughing, we have to get him back to the house."

"I'm fine," Dash protested, struggling to rise to his paws.

Saderia and Karenisha instantly darted forward in one quick movement to catch him when he started to fall and gently lowered him to the ground.

He gasped and tried to choke back a cough. "Thanks."

"Just relax," Karenisha repeated.

Dash nodded meekly and huddled against the ground until the coughing faded away. The Queen turned around to face the others as Dash panted to catch his breath.

"Saderia, help him up," the Queen ordered. "Makero, lead the way back home. Cia and Jash, walk behind us to make sure he doesn't fall."

Saderia crouched down to press against Dash. Karenisha leaned down on Dash's other side and slowly lifted him up. Supported by the two of them, Dash was finally able to get to his paws, though his legs still wobbled. Together they started creeping unsteadily in the direction of the house. Saderia's heart beat rapidly as they moved through the woods. The trek seemed to last for ages and every time Dash stumbled, her heart skipped a beat. Images of the sick cougars kept flashing through her mind, making her burn with fear. What if Dash was sick?

Overwhelming relief poured into her heart when she padded out of the woods and spotted her home waiting just a few feet away. Resisting the urge to run, she carefully led him into the house and directed him past the entrance of his room. With her parents' help, she gently lifted him up onto the bed. Letting out a sigh of relief, Dash sank down onto the rocky surface of the bed, letting his weak muscles relax. Saderia remained tense.

"Mom?" she stammered. "Dash...Does he...?"

Karenisha let out a long sigh. "He has the disease."

Saderia's eyes widened in horror at her mother's soft words as images of the sick, helpless animals whirled through her mind.

Dash weakly raised his head to look at them and tried to smile at Saderia. "Don't worry, Saderia. I...I don't feel that bad."

Karenisha looked back while Saderia gave him a disbelieving look. "Cia, Jash," the Queen called. "Get the rest of the food and give it to Dash."

Cia and Uncle Jash blinked in surprise. A look of reluctance flickered in their eyes for less than a second before they silently nodded and stepped out of the room.

Dash looked up at them in dismay. "All of it? What about the rest of you?"

"We had plenty yesterday," Makero replied. "You had none."

"But..."

Karenisha's eyes flashed. "Dash, as your Queen and mother, I *order* you to eat it."

He blinked in surprise, then shrugged and looked away. "Fine, Karenisha."

Saderia looked back at the sound of claws scraping against stone and saw Cia and Uncle Jash pad quietly into the room and drop a small bundle of food on Dash's bed.

Makero narrowed his eyes. "This is all of it?"

Cia's fur bristled. "Of course it is! What kind of animals do you think we are?"

"Relax, Cia, we're just worried. This is plenty." Karenisha gave Cia and Uncle Jash a nod, then turned to look at her daughter. "As for you, Saderia, you will have to go back to staying in your own room. Until Dash is better, you must stay away from him."

Saderia narrowed her eyes. "No way. You'd have to kill me first."

Karenisha's eyes widened in surprise. "But Saderia, I can't let you catch the sickness as well. It would be foolish not to stay away."

Saderia sharply flicked her tail. "I'm not changing my answer, Mom."

She tried to protest, then broke off. "You're too stubborn for your own good."

Dash looked up. "Karenisha..."

"No, Dash. You can try to reason with her if you want, but I doubt you'll get anywhere. You know how she gets when she makes up her mind." She glanced at Saderia with pleading eyes. "Saderia, please take every precaution to not catch the sickness."

She narrowed her eyes. "What about Dash?"

Karenisha sighed. "You already know a cure hasn't been found. We'll just have to wait and see how it goes and hope he can fight it off on his own."

"This isn't right!" she burst out.

"What else is new?" Uncle Jash muttered, looking gloomily down at his paws.

The Queen gave him a sharp glare, then exchanged a dark look with Makero.

An uneasy feeling crept down Saderia's spine. "What are you two thinking?"

"Nothing," Karenisha sighed. "Do what you want with staying around Dash. As of now, though, you are responsible for collecting food. Don't shirk your responsibilities."

She narrowed her eyes. "What was that look about?"

"Yes, do you have some sort of plan?" Cia spoke up, giving her a hopeful glance.

Karenisha glanced at Makero for a long moment, then turned around to face them with a dark, shadowed expression. "I have an idea. But I don't want to try it yet."

Uncle Jash blinked in confusion. "Karenisha, if you have a plan, you should try it. Animals are getting sick by the hour. The sickness is spreading faster every day."

"And others are dying from it," Cia put in, staring at them with wide, surprised blue eyes. "What if they all get infected? What if the disease wipes out the whole forest?"

"Enough!" Makero shouted, making them jump. "Karenisha and I will talk it over. But now with Dash ill, our plan is going to be harder. We can't give ourselves special treatment or the animals will revolt. The plan risks our own family. Keep that in mind."

"And trying to keep the fact that the Prince is ill secret from the forest will be next to impossible," Karenisha growled, her eyes darkening.

Cia blinked in confusion. "I don't understand. Why would it hurt our family? Would it be a bad blow or something we could take?"

Karenisha stared silently out into the den. "I don't know. I don't control things anymore. I can only do what I can to help, but there's no chance that it won't affect us." She glanced at Dash. "Dash, I need you to try to get as healthy as possible within a week."

He blinked at her in shock. "W-What?"

"You can't say something like that, it's not up to him," Makero snapped.

"I'm aware of that, but that's the only thing that would help us now." She heaved a sigh. "I guess we'll just have to see how things go over the next week and if Dash isn't better, I'll have no choice." She narrowed her eyes at her scared family. "Saderia, since you're already up and out in

the woods for reasons I don't even want to know about, you will go collect fruit. Don't go near the neighborhoods or there will be consequences. Cia, Jash, go back to sleep unless you know of another way to make yourselves useful."

Uncle Jash shrugged uncomfortably. "We could collect fruit as well..."

Karenisha shrugged. "Very well. Feel free to come home before Saderia."

Saderia blinked in shock. Was her mother punishing her...or was she just trying to keep her away from Dash? Her fur bristled in indignation, but she didn't comment.

"Makero will stay outside your room in case you need anything," she added to Dash. "I will check around to see how things are going in the forest. I'll be back soon to switch places with Makero so he can get some sleep. Dash, eat the fruit, and if you don't, I will punish you." She looked sternly around at her family. "Everybody, get to work."

Whirling around, Karenisha stalked out of the room with Makero close behind her. Silence fell over the room as soon as their swishing tails disappeared behind the wall. Exchanging baffled glances, Cia and Uncle Jash slowly padded out of the room and headed toward the entrance of the den to collect fruit, leaving Saderia and Dash alone in the tense air of the room. Giving Dash an apologetic glance that he returned with a weak smile, Saderia reluctantly followed her aunt and uncle out of the room. Turning to face the woods outside the den, she started forward, then paused when she felt a firm paw grab her shoulder and turned to see Karenisha staring at her with a sad, grim look in her eyes.

"Before you go, Saderia, I just want to tell you I love you," she murmured.

Saderia stared back at her and blinked in confusion. "I...I love you too, Mom."

The Queen managed a weak smile, but her eyes were dull. "I'm telling you this because I mean it. And I want you to remember it. I'll always love you even if I do things that hurt you. I want you to remember this because soon you will hate me."



Days passed and not a single symptom of the sickness troubled Saderia. Karenisha and Makero watched her closely to make sure that spending so much time with Dash wasn't infecting her with the disease, but so far it hadn't touched her at all. At night, she slept close to Dash and didn't jerk away in fear or disgust when he accidentally let out a harsh cough. In the daytime, they shared their food. When his fur became tangled and dirty, she smoothed it out and ignored the faint scent of sickness. No matter what she did, she seemed immune to the disease and received less complaints about spending so much time with him from Dash and the others. Somehow the sickness just didn't hurt her.

Dash wasn't as lucky. His fur became increasingly dirty and matted, and he seemed to grow weaker every day. Exhaustion was clear in his bloodshot eyes even after hours of rest and pain hid behind his reassuring expression. Headaches and stomachaches plagued him nearly every day. No matter how hard he tried to ignore the pain or suppress the coughs, he could never succeed. He was as gaunt as ever despite getting the biggest cut of food. There was barely enough to ration out. With the persisting cold weather, food was incredibly difficult to find. Saderia spent hours searching for food, and each time she was forced to move farther and farther away from her home to find even a tiny scrap.

No one had come any closer to figuring out a cure for the disease or discovering where it had come from. Some believed a bug had caused it. Others thought there was something strange in the fruit that had brought out the sickness. No one knew for certain what had created the disease. Unfortunately, many animals were growing desperate for a cure and reasoned out the disease in strange ways to find an explanation and to uncover a cure. Ideas of false cures spread like wildfire to the animals desperate enough to try them. One of the trends was to drink the poisonous river water in the hopes that it would somehow cancel out whatever toxin had spawned the disease and cure them. It didn't.

Thievery ran rampant as the days grew colder. Blankets were stolen off the backs of diseased animals. Other animals found their homes completely ransacked. Trust was a rarity. Friendship was just as rare. Agreements had become extinct long ago.

"You've really got to relax," Dash murmured when Saderia padded into his room with a few scraps of food. "I will be all right."

“And the forest?” she retorted, leaping up onto his bed. “I saw some of the other neighborhoods when I was out looking for food and they’re not doing well.”

Dash sighed. “I’m sorry. But some have recovered. They must be able to fight it.”

Saderia looked down. “Hopefully. You...you’ll fight it, right?”

“Of course. It’s really not all that bad.” He shrugged sheepishly when she gave him a skeptical glance. “Okay, so it’s kind of painful, but I can deal with that.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What about coughing and stuff?”

“I’ve got it under control.”

She rolled her eyes and let out an annoyed breath, then let it go and looked into the den with a more somber expression. “What do you think Mom was talking about before?”

Dash frowned. “I don’t know, but if it’s for the forest, it should be good, right?”

A dark chill slid down Saderia’s spine. “Not necessarily.”

The silence of the den was interrupted by the soft thud of paw steps. Saderia and Dash looked up to see Cia slump into the room. “They all know you’re sick by now,” she murmured. She heaved a heavy sigh. “One little slip and it was all over the forest.”

Dash shrugged. “That’s fine, Cia. I don’t really care.”

Cia flicked her tail. “Yes, well, Karenisha seems to. How are you doing anyway?”

“Not better, not worse. Why?” He frowned. “What’s Karenisha so upset about?”

Cia just shook her head. “I don’t know, but she and Makero obviously have something planned. She’s awfully quiet about it but...”

“Cia!” Saderia’s aunt froze as the Queen’s sharp voice boomed from outside. “Come here now. Bring Saderia. Dash, stay in the room. I’ll discuss it with you later.”

Saderia and Dash frowned at her cool tone and exchanged a long, nervous glance. Cia fidgeted in the corner, then reluctantly turned and signaled for Saderia to follow with a look of helplessness. Casting a lingering glance at Dash, Saderia slowly pulled herself off the bed and followed Cia out into the main room of the den, her tail flicking with

unease. Standing at the entrance to the den were Karenisha and Makero, while off to the side Uncle Jash sat, looking anxious and uncomfortable. Saderia and Cia cautiously sat down to face Karenisha and Makero's dark faces with uncertainty gleaming in their eyes.

Karenisha glanced at them with a cool air of formality, as if she was holding an important meeting rather than talking to her family. "I'm sure you've seen the condition of the forest. It has gotten worse over the last few weeks. The sickness will not stop spreading as long as the sick and the healthy are in close quarters. Anyone who lives in a five mile vicinity of the diseased now runs a risk of getting sick. This has to stop."

Makero let out a heavy sigh. "The forest hates us. We can no longer help them. All we can do is hope for the best. What we're about to suggest might just set them over the edge and if we give ourselves special treatment, that will be it. I would be surprised if they didn't try to kill us. So no matter what, we must treat our family as we would treat the rest of the forest. The forest will soon have to make sacrifices. We will too."

A dark, uneasy feeling crept up Saderia's spine. What were they getting at?

"The sick animals will be quarantined." Karenisha faced them darkly. "We will put them in the warehouse where Cia and Jash used to make furniture. Without the knowledge of anyone, Makero and I have spent the last week building a barricade around the warehouse. There is one hole in the wall and a rock beside it. We will put the sick in that fortress and seal it. Makero and I will be guards to make sure no one tries to break out. The den is far away from the neighborhoods, so the sickness shouldn't spread."

"Wait a minute..."

"Maeta has offered to go with the sick to try to cure the disease," Karenisha went on, not giving Saderia time to speak. "Nothing has worked so far, so the animals are simply going to have to fight it off. No one will be allowed to visit the sick because they could bring the sickness back into the forest. Anyone who tries to break in *will* be punished. The sick will stay there until they are cured of the disease. Or otherwise."

"Karenisha, this is sick," Cia exclaimed, her eyes wide with horror.

"I'm aware of that, but we have no choice. Would you rather everyone dies, Cia? There is no other way." She took a deep breath.

“Tomorrow we will round up the sick animals and put them in the fortress. Any others that fall ill will be put in there as well.”

“But...but what was Dad talking about at first? About us having to make...sacrifices?” Saderia looked up at her parents with wide, fearful eyes, her heart pounding so fast she could barely feel it. She felt cold, numb, and sick to her stomach.

Makero met her gaze with pain shining in his green eyes, then looked away. After what seemed like years, he finally let out a heavy sigh. “Dash will go with them.”

# Chapter Fifteen

## Necessary Evil

Saderia's heart stopped. "What?"

Makero took a deep breath and met her stunned, horrified gaze. "Dash will be quarantined with the other sick animals. It will be good for the forest. It will stop the disease from spreading and it will make sure no new animals fall ill. The forest will have to make sacrifices for the good of us all and we will have to do so as well. It will help..."

Saderia shook her head rapidly back and forth. "No. No, this is a mistake!"

"Saderia—"

"You're making a mistake!" she cried out. Her whole body felt numb and cold and her heart felt as if it had turned to ice. "You can't mean this! You...you can't." She shook her head desperately back and forth. "This is a mistake!"

"No, Saderia." A wave of terror crashed over her when her mother turned to stare down at her with dark, serious amber eyes. "It's not a mistake."

"But you can't mean it," Saderia choked out.

"Saderia." Karenisha coldly met her gaze. "We mean it. Dash *will* go with them."

The disbelief shining in her amber eyes melted into a wide-eyed look of horror. She shakily shook her head, unable to stop. Goose bumps crawled over her skin and her body trembled with shock and dizziness. "You...you can't," she whispered. "They'll die."

"Saderia—"

"They'll *die*!" she repeated, her voice rising with disbelief. "You can't do this!"

Karenisha let out a long, heavy sigh. "We have to do this."

"No." The shock freezing her in place crashed to the ground like pieces of ice. Her heart thumped to life, sending freezing blood burning

through her body. “No, I won’t let you! He’s not going! I won’t let you take him! If he goes, he’ll die! They’ll all die!”

“Saderia, he’s got a good chance to...”

“You’re a liar!” She gritted her teeth, trying to force her legs to stop shaking. “He doesn’t *need* to go! He’s not sick! He’s not like the rest of them!”

Karenisha took a deep breath. “Saderia, he is sick. The only way to kill this sickness is to keep it from spreading. We have to keep the sick away from the healthy to make sure the sick animals can recover without infecting any others and Dash is sick.”

Saderia bared her fangs in a savage snarl. “The only way to kill the sickness is to kill the animals who have it! You know that’s what’s going to happen in there—that’s why you’re doing it! You know that if Dash goes in there, he’s never coming out!”

Karenisha’s fur bristled in fury. “That’s not true—”

“It is true!” She hissed in disgust. “That’s what you mean by ‘sacrifices!’ The sick animals *are* the sacrifices! Those animals are meant to die, so the lucky ones can live.”

Karenisha lashed her tail in anger. “That’s a lie! That’s not why we’re doing this!”

“It’s exactly why you’re doing it! I’m not stupid, Mom!” Her whole body shook with fear and rage. “You can’t do this! The forest animals won’t let you do this! It’s evil!”

She hissed. “This is not a plan to send them to their death. It’s supposed to help.”

“That’s exactly what this plan is!” she snapped, lashing her tail. “I don’t care how good it looks in your twisted minds! This is a death sentence!”

“Saderia!” Karenisha’s furious eyes burned into hers. “No matter what it is, it’s our only option. It’s our only choice and we’re taking it. That’s final.”

Silence fell over the den. Saderia shook so badly she felt faint. Cia and Uncle Jash sat off to the side, frozen like statues and watching them with eyes filled with shock and horror. The air around them was thick with tension and the mingled scent of fear and fury.

“I’ll destroy the wall,” Saderia finally whispered, her voice as cold as ice in the fiery tension. “Put them in there if you want. I’ll find some way to break the fortress.”

“It’s virtually impossible,” Karenisha murmured. “And completely impossible for one animal. You would never find a way in.”

She gritted her teeth. “Then I’ll hide Dash!”

Karenisha met her furious gaze. “I thought ahead. We’re taking him now.”

Fear and dismay sliced through her heart sharper than a claw. Her eyes widened in horror and she clumsily staggered back to block the entrance to Dash’s room. “No!” she screamed. “You can’t! I won’t let you! I’ll fight you if I have to! You can’t take him!”

Karenisha let out a sigh. “Saderia, move. There’s nothing you can do to stop us.”

Saderia squeezed her eyes shut, fighting to push back a flood of salty tears. Biting down on her lip, she struggled to hold herself together, but she felt like she was about to collapse. The world spun around her. A sob choked out of her throat. “I hate you.”

“What’s going on?”

Saderia looked up sharply at the sound of the soft voice and whirled around to see Dash standing worriedly in the entrance to his room, his legs shaking underneath him.

“Dash!” she gasped. “Don’t listen to anything they say!”

“Dash, please come with me now,” Karenisha murmured, stepping toward him.

“No, don’t go!” Saderia hissed, blinking tears out of her eyes. “It’s a trick!”

Karenisha narrowed her eyes. “I’m not going to trick him, Saderia. I will talk to him first. I will not be dishonest.”

“You’ll still take him against his will!” she snarled, her eyes flashing with rage.

Karenisha flicked her tail and met her burning gaze. “I will give him the chance to go willingly and only resort to force if necessary.”

“How kind,” she spat. “That’s not a choice, it’s a threat! To your own son!”

The Queen looked away, but not before Saderia saw pain flash in her eyes. “Dash, I need to discuss something with you,” she murmured, keeping her eyes on the ground.

Dash blinked in surprise and glanced around the room in shock. His amber eyes scanned Karenisha and Makero’s grim faces and traced over Cia and Uncle Jash’s stunned expressions. Confusion gleamed in his eyes as they pierced through the thick air in the room until he finally turned to gaze at Saderia. Shock and concern darkened his gaze the instant he spotted her horrified expression and noticed the tears shining on the edges of her eyes. His eyes met hers and he never looked away. “What’s going on?”

Saderia opened her mouth to speak, but Karenisha interrupted. “Saderia, I will tell him everything I just told you. We will be in Dash’s room. You are free to wait outside and observe closely so you can be sure that I’m not taking him without your knowledge.” After giving her a long, lingering glance, the Queen pushed past her and stalked into his room, brushing her tail against Dash’s side to lead him away.

Dash’s eyes lingered on her shaky form for what seemed like ages before he finally forced himself to turn around and follow the Queen. Glancing over his shoulder, he watched her closely until he finally disappeared behind the solid wall of rock.

His tail flicking away seemed to break her out of a trance. Blinking to push back a wave of tears, she sat back beside the entrance, knowing there was nothing she could do but wait and hope that Dash could change Karenisha’s mind. Hanging her head, she bit back a sob and squeezed her eyes shut. She barely heard Makero’s paw steps thudding against the ground and almost didn’t feel him sit down beside her and place his tail around her shoulders.

“Saderia,” Makero murmured, “I know you’re upset and I know you don’t want to hear anymore from us, but we’ve got no choice. Our paws are tied, Saderia.”

She turned away with a bitter growl. “This is a mistake. He’s not sick.”

Makero sighed. “Yes, he is, Saderia, and you know it. The forest is going to have to make this sort of sacrifice, so we must, as well. It’s only right.”



Her eyes narrowed in disgust. “It’s anything but right, Dad. It’s sick.”

Makero heaved a sigh. “It’s our only choice. You’ll understand someday.”

Saderia let out a growl. “I hope I never become cruel enough to understand shipping sick animals off to die.” Her eyes flashed with pain and she turned away. “I guess it’s not bad enough I lost Dingo. Now I get to watch Dash die, too.”

Makero winced. “I’m sorry. There will be many survivors, and Dash doesn’t have the disease as bad as others. He has a good chance of making it through this.”

She lashed her tail and glared up at him. “And if he doesn’t?”

Makero stared at his paws and didn’t answer.

Saderia watched him coldly, her eyes dark with pain. “You don’t care about him!” she hissed. “You wouldn’t bat an eyelid if he did die. You’ve never cared about him...”

“That’s a lie!” Makero hissed. “Karenisha and I love Dash like our own son.”

“Then how can you do something like this? Who sends their own son off to die?”

Makero took a deep breath. “We’re not sending him off to die. This isn’t easy, but we have to do this. I don’t know how else to explain it to you. Do you really believe we have so much power? In times like this, you’re wrong. We do what we have to.”

Saderia hissed. “Why don’t you make it so you *don’t* have to? You *are* royalty!”

Makero buried his face in his paw. “Saderia, it’s so difficult to explain! We *can’t* change it! We can’t cure this disease, and if we don’t do something, we don’t stand a chance of surviving. When you’re royalty, the group has to be more important than the individual. If some don’t make it, we can keep going. If none make it, we’re gone.”

“Well, it’s good to know loyalty to the forest means killing your own son.” She fought back tears. “Dad, *please*. Dash is the only friend I have left. I can’t live if he dies.”

Makero narrowed his eyes. “That’s not true—”

“Yes, it is.” She looked up with tears quivering on her eyelids. “Do you have any idea what I’ve been through the past few months after leaving my friend to be murdered? Do you have any idea why I’m still here and not a complete mess? The reason is Dash. If you take him away, I’ve got nothing left.” She shook her head and bit her lip, feeling tears slip down her cheeks. “You don’t understand. You’ll never understand, so don’t try.”

Her father looked away. Karenisha’s quiet voice was the only sound in the tense silence. Ignoring her aunt and uncle’s stunned gazes and her father’s stony silence, Saderia sat rigidly still and waited for her mother to finish her explanation. Her mind was spinning so fast she could barely breathe and her eyes stung with tears, but she fought back the sorrow. There had to be something she could do to help Dash. Wild possibilities swirled through her mind, but each option seemed even more unlikely than the next.

Blinking out of her thoughts, she looked around and gradually began to notice the tense silence pressing down on them. Not a single whisper breathed out of Dash’s room where he and Karenisha remained hidden behind a wall. The explanation was over.

Casting a dark glance at her father as if warning him not to stop her, she slowly pushed herself up and stalked into the room. Her eyes narrowed when she spotted Karenisha standing over Dash with grim amber eyes while he stared silently down at the ground, his expression an unreadable mixture of emotions. Feeling her fur begin to bristle, Saderia gritted her teeth, bounded forward, and stopped right in front of Dash.

“Dash,” she hissed. “We can do something. We can find some way to stop this. We can run, we can hide. You don’t have to go. We can find some way to...”

“Saderia...” She bit her lip when Dash interrupted her and tried to ignore the salty tears quivering on the edges of her eyes. Dash stared at her for what felt like years before slowly looking down and letting out a long, heavy sigh. “Saderia, please calm down.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “Calm down? Aren’t you upset? Don’t you...”

“No, Saderia,” he murmured, calmly meeting her gaze. “I’m going to go. Don’t panic. Your parents are right. It might seem cruel, but this is the only thing we can do. I have to go. This is the only way to get rid of the disease and if the other forest animals are going to have to make their own

sacrifices, then I don't want any special treatment. I want to help reassure them and get rid of this sickness, not hide and become a liability."

She shook her head in horror, her heart racing. "No! What if you die?"

"I'll do everything I can to survive. You're my best friend, Saderia. I know you're upset, but I have to go. This is for the good of the forest."

A furious growl rose in her throat. "You sound just like Mom! You actually believe those stupid lies? You actually think condemning the Prince and half the population to death will solve our problems?"

"I think a cure would solve our problems," he murmured, giving her a reassuring touch with his tail. "But we don't have that, and at this rate, we never will. The only way to save the forest is to stop it from spreading and this is the only way to do it."

Saderia gritted her teeth. "So what are you? Just a sacrifice we're going to throw in the fortress to forget about and leave to waste away?"

"No one's going to forget about us, Saderia. I don't want to go, but I know it's the right thing to do. I want to be able to reassure the other animals and give them the strength they'll need to fight the disease. I want to make sure no other animals fall ill because of me and try to help the ones who are already sick."

Shaking her head frantically, she slapped him. "Why don't you ever think of yourself? Don't you even want to live? Don't you care what happens to me if you die?"

Karenisha looked up sharply and gaped in shock. "Saderia, that was uncalled for!"

Dash spared a quick glance up at Karenisha and tenderly brushed his paw across the bloody lines scarring his face before carefully meeting Saderia's scared gaze. "Of course I do. But whether I stay here or go there, my chance of getting better is about equal. I already have the disease. It's not like I can catch it again. My chances of recovering are no better or worse in either place so long as I take care of myself. And as long as I stay here, I'm putting you all in danger of getting sick. I don't want that on my conscious. Let's turn it around for a minute. If it was you, would you go?"

Saderia looked away and didn't respond.

Dash gave her a sympathetic gaze. "If this is how I can help, I'll do it. I'll be fine."

She shook her head miserably. Why was *he* the one comforting *her*? “How can you know you’ll be fine? I won’t even get to see you. The only way I’ll be able to know how you are is if you show up here healthy...or if my parents start organizing a funeral.”

He looked away. “I know it’s hard, Saderia. I’ll miss you so much when I go, but I have to. The way you can know how I’m doing is by believing me when I say I’ll take care of myself and do everything to get better if only to make sure you won’t be upset.”

Saderia closed her eyes and looked away while Dash draped his tail comfortingly over her shoulder and pressed his fur against hers to give her someone to lean against.

Karenisha looked back and forth between them with a dark, unreadable expression before speaking in a soft, strained voice. “Dash, since you are being so understanding about this, I’ll allow you to stay another day. Tomorrow I’ll be rounding up the other sick animals and you can come with me then. For tonight, you can stay here with Saderia.”

He let out a sigh and nodded against Saderia’s damp cheek. “Thank you.”

The Queen nodded sadly, avoiding his eyes. “Stay here for now. Makero and I have to tell the forest and they won’t be happy. We’ll be back as soon as we can.”

Saderia flattened her ears and pressed closer to Dash, pretending she hadn’t heard her speak. She felt her mother’s eyes boring into her back until she finally turned away and padded silently out of the room. Saderia’s fur bristled when she heard the Queen murmur something to Cia and Uncle Jash in a soft voice she wasn’t supposed to hear: “Watch her.” A moment later, two sets of paws thudded softly against the rock and faded off into the distance. An image of the stunned faces of the forest animals flickered into her mind, but she forced it away. She didn’t want to imagine the forest animals’ reaction.

Taking a deep breath, Saderia glared out into the main room where Cia and Uncle Jash stood helplessly side by side. A low growl rumbled in her throat. “I hate her.”

Dash flicked her with his tail. “No, you don’t. She’s just doing what’s best.”

Saderia lashed her tail in fury. “She’s not doing what’s best. How can this be best?” She shook her head desperately. “Dash, please don’t go with her.”

He rested a paw gently on her shoulder. “Even if I didn’t want to go, we don’t really have a choice. Cia and Jash are watching us, so we can’t run away.”

“They’re still shocked. Maybe we can slip past them.”

Dash heaved a long sigh. “That’s not the point. I’m going and that’s it. I don’t know how long I’ll be there, but I have to stay there for however long it takes to get over this disease and make sure I’m not endangering you. I have to do this for the forest.” He sat back with a deep breath and tried to give her a weak smile. “We’ve got another day before I leave, so try to relax and not stress about it. Panicking will just make it worse.”

“Relax?” She stared at him in disbelief, wondering if this was one of the last times she would get to see him smiling back at her. In less than a few hours between that day and the next, Dash could disappear and never return. After all they had been through saving each other, keeping each other strong, fighting their way through the desert, working together to solve their problems and clear the obstacles, and looking after each other, the last moments she might have to hear his voice, feel his fur pressing against hers, and see him standing in front of her and gazing at her with his kind amber eyes had been reduced to just a few hours. After he left, it was out of her hands and she was helpless. All she would be able to do would be to sit and wait hour after hour, day after day for news of Dash’s fate, good or bad, and remain in the dark as to how he was doing until that news came.

She winced and looked away, desperately trying to ignore those thoughts. With no way to stop it, all it did was drive her mad with fear and helplessness. Maybe Dash was right when he said he would be fine and that it would help the forest. He had to be right. Dash was always right. She couldn’t bear to think he might be wrong. The only thing she could do was believe him and hope for the best, or she wouldn’t be able to stand it.

“Fine,” she muttered. “What do you want to do to ‘relax?’”

Dash gave her a kind smile. “Why don’t we just stay here and talk?” He turned around and leapt onto the bed, then turned to face her, patting the spot beside him.

Saderia nodded and tried to smile as she climbed up next to him, but it didn't reach her eyes. The smile faded, but she looked up when she felt Dash's soft paw wrap around hers. Tears burned her eyes when she met his calm gaze, but she blinked the tears away. If these were her last moments with Dash, she wanted them to be perfect.

Sunlight shimmered into the room, casting a warm glow over her fur. Blinking sleepily in the faint light, Saderia slowly lifted her head to look around, then paused. Dash laid curled up close beside her with a light, peaceful smile spread across his face. The unruly hair of his mane splayed across the bed had draped across her paw and brushed against her cheek while his paw laid lightly on top of hers. His eyes stayed peacefully shut even as the sun twinkled outside and bathed his messy fur in a shimmering beam of light.

A slight smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, then faded as the memories of last night drifted back to her mind. The vicious argument between her and her parents seemed to replay over and over in her mind, haunting her with guilt and fear. She looked down at Dash's sleeping, tranquil form and felt her heart ache with pain. A tiny glimmer of hope and desperation lit up her eyes. Maybe her parents had given up their plans. She hadn't seen them return last night, so maybe the forest had fought the idea so strongly they had no other choice but to abandon it. She glanced at Dash and desperately hoped that something had stopped them. Something *had* to have happened. It just *had* to.

Gently pulling her paw out from underneath Dash's, she rolled around and glanced out into the main room. She frowned when she saw Cia and Uncle Jash standing outside, huddled together and looking uneasy. The distinct gleam of worry lit up their blue eyes as they murmured things too quiet for her to hear. A small feeling of nervousness nagged at the back of Saderia's mind. What were they so anxious about?

Casting a glance at Dash, she carefully pushed back the blanket and tucked it around him. Being careful not to wake him, she leapt down and crept into the main room. Cia and Uncle Jash looked up in alarm at the sound of her paw steps and froze in panic.

"Saderia," Cia stammered. "You're up."

Saderia frowned and padded closer. "Cia? Where are Mom and Dad?"

"Um..." Cia fidgeted uneasily and cast a nervous glance at Uncle Jash before reluctantly turning back to face her. "Your...your parents went to the fortress to check to make sure the wall is solid. They're getting it ready for...later."

Saderia blinked in shock. "What?"

"They left a few moments before you awoke," Uncle Jash murmured, glancing uncomfortably at her face. "They just wanted to check it...one last time."

Saderia stared at them in horror. Hadn't the forest animals rebelled? Hadn't they changed their minds? "They...they're still going through with this?"

Uncle Jash shifted uneasily. "Well...yes, it seems like they are."

"What?" She gaped in disbelief. "I thought they would come to their senses. I thought the forest would fight back..." She trailed off in horror. "How can they do this?"

"Well, the forest animals weren't thrilled," Cia murmured. "But Karenisha and Makero convinced them it was...for the best. They said the kingdom seemed to accept it when they told them Dash would be going. They seemed to feel safer knowing that..."

A sharp, painful feeling of betrayal stabbed her heart. "That's why they wanted to take Dash...They're using him as an *example*." She gaped in disgust. "This wasn't about fairness at all. He's just a pawn they're using to get the forest animals to like the idea."

Uncle Jash nervously rested his tail on her shoulder. "I...I'm sure that wasn't their intention, Saderia. Your parents are just trying to keep the kingdom safe."

"The parents I remember never did things like this," she spat. "They didn't use us as props or play stupid mind games with the forest." She shook her head in disbelief. "This is *sick*. Can't you do something? Can't you see this is wrong?"

Cia looked away. "I don't know what's right or wrong anymore. I've tried to talk to Karenisha, but she's not changing her mind. There's nothing we can do."

Saderia shook her head furiously, her heart pounding with fear. “Why? Why can’t anybody stand up to them? Can’t anybody see what they’re doing is wrong?”

“Saderia, they’re immovable. They’re not changing their minds. And...and maybe this will be good for the forest.” Cia looked down uncomfortably, hiding the tiny twinkle of hope in her eyes. “Maybe this is the only thing that will save us.”

Saderia gaped in horror. “This is sick! You’re all sick! How will this save the ones who are ill, the ones who actually need saving? Or are they just hopeless cases? Don’t you see how much they’re suffering? And you think it’s a good idea to make it worse?”

“Saderia?”

She turned away from Cia and Uncle Jash’s alarmed faces and whirled around at the sound of the soft voice. When she saw Dash standing weakly in the entrance to the room with wide eyes and shaking legs, she froze and felt her muscles tense with worry.

“Dash?”

He carefully took a step toward her and stumbled across the stony floor when he staggered off balance. Saderia instantly darted forward and pressed against him to hold him up, her eyes glimmering with worry. “Are you okay?” she whispered.

“I’m fine,” he murmured, looking up with tired eyes to meet her gaze. “It’s you I’m worried about.” Taking a deep breath, he steadied himself and carefully turned around, leading her back into the bedroom.

Biting her lip, she leapt up onto the bed and leaned forward to help Dash, but he waved her paws away and climbed up on his own. He let out a long sigh when he sank to his belly, but almost instantly he looked up to meet her stare with concerned amber eyes.

He wrapped his paw gently around hers. “Are you okay? You look so upset.”

She wiped at the tears pricking her eyes. “How exactly am I supposed to look when you’re leaving today? Do you know where Mom and Dad are?”

“Most likely doing something related to their plan.” He sighed and squeezed her paw. “I thought we talked about this last night. You knew what was going to happen.”



“It doesn’t make it easier now. I...I thought they would change their minds...”

Dash blinked. “Why would you think that? They must have given it a lot of thought beforehand. They would have to have been sure they were going to do it before they told us. They wouldn’t want to upset you for no reason. They hate seeing you upset.”

“Really? That’s news to me.” She took a deep breath and looked away. “You can’t leave, Dash. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

He gave her a weak smile. “You’ll be fine, Saderia. You’re strong.” He gave her a gentle flick of his tail. “I think we’ll both be fine. Just try not to worry. I’m not worried.”

She gritted her teeth. “Because you’re an idiot!”

He shrugged. “Maybe I am. It doesn’t matter. Worrying won’t change anything.”

She let out a shaky sigh. “Fine. Go then. But if you don’t come back...”

“I will,” he murmured. “I...I promise.” He bit his lip the instant he said it. They both knew that was a promise he had no control over, one he might not be able to keep.

“Don’t,” she muttered. “Don’t promise. Dingo promised he would catch up to us and he didn’t. Don’t promise or you might do the same thing.”

Dash winced. “All right. I won’t promise. But I will do my best.” He took a deep breath. “So how do you want to spend the time until your parents get back?”

Saderia sighed and looked away, knowing she was powerless to stop Dash from leaving. She couldn’t hate her parents anyway. She could outwit Dastarius, outmaneuver Lolista, and run from the dingoes, but she couldn’t fight her parents and she couldn’t fight Dash. All she could do was hope for the best and believe Dash would be all right.

She took a deep breath to slow the fearful pounding of her heart. Only a few final hours or even minutes remained before Dash left. Of all the things they could do, how did she want to spend her last few minutes with Dash? She let out a soft sigh.

“All I want to do is go outside and talk. That way, things are almost normal.”

Dread scorched through Saderia's body when she heard paws crunching the leaves on the ground. Looking up, she felt a wave of dismay wash over her when the bushes on the edge of the woods in front of her parted and her parents stepped out. The King and Queen looked up and narrowed their eyes when they spotted the two of them standing side by side outside the den. Saderia avoided their gaze as they padded forward and stopped in front of them. She hung her head when they looked down to stare at her.

Karenisha took a deep breath. "Saderia—"

"Don't bother. Take him if you have to. There's nothing I can do. I'm powerless to do anything." Her dark eyes flashed up to her face. "You've made sure of that."

Karenisha sighed and glanced at Dash. "Dash, are you coming willingly?"

"Yes, Karenisha." Dash gave Saderia's tail a tight squeeze and gave her one last kind smile before reluctantly stepping toward the King and Queen. "I'll come willingly."

Karenisha took a deep breath. "Good. In that case, may I ask a favor of you?"

Saderia gritted her teeth and bit back a hiss. First her mother forced Dash to go to a sick fortress to be locked away and now she actually had the nerve to ask him a favor?

Dash took a deep breath and nodded with a weak smile. "Of course, Karenisha."

Karenisha smiled gratefully. "Thank you. I would like you to be the first one in the fortress, and when we lead the other sick animals to the area, I would like you to help them find a place to settle and keep them from escaping while we bring more in. It's going to be a long process, but it would be easier if you could do just those two things."

Dash nodded tiredly and tried to return the smile. "Of course."

"All right. I'll also need you to come with us to the meeting we're going to hold to round up some of the animals, so we can show the animals that you are going, too. That might help them trust this decision."

"Of course."

Anger seared Saderia's chest and she spat in her mother's direction.

Apart from an agitated flick of her tail, the Queen didn't appear to notice.

"Then come with us." Makero glanced toward Saderia's aunt and uncle and gave them a nod. "Cia, Jash, watch Saderia while we're gone."

Alarm flashed in her aunt and uncle's blue eyes. They exchanged an uneasy glance, unsure of what exactly they would do if Saderia tried to revolt. Saderia spared a glance in their direction before facing Dash and fighting back the tears stinging her eyes.

"Bye, Saderia," Dash murmured, waving his tail in farewell.

"Bye," she whispered.

Their eyes met and they stared at each other for what felt like ages, their amber eyes dull with sadness and regret. Their gazes lingered on each other for an eternity that felt too short before Dash finally turned around to follow Karenisha and Makero into the woods. His tail brushed softly against her shoulder as he passed by, then drooped to the ground. Her eyes followed him as he padded away, flanked by the King and Queen. She blinked and the tip of his dark tail had already disappeared behind a wall of greenery.

Saderia stood frozen to the spot. Her eyes lingered on the spot where Dash had vanished, never blinking. It was as if she had been turned to stone.

"Saderia..." At the sound of her aunt's quiet voice, she looked up to see Cia staring at her with sympathetic blue eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so, so sorry."

Saderia stared at her through dull, lifeless eyes for what seemed like years before she finally turned away and stared out at the woods. Her eyes stared intently at the leafy wall separating her from Dash, trying desperately to pierce through the trees to catch one last glimpse of her closest friend. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't spot even a tiny hint of dark brown fur through the thick bushes guarding the woods.

Dash was gone. Memories were all she had left of him.

Thoughts of Saderia haunted Dash's mind, making his fur burn with regret. Images of her stunned face and the tears glistening on her eyelids flashed through his mind. The pain and misery he had seen gleaming in her amber eyes burned in his mind, making his heart ache with pain. Keeping

close to the King and Queen, he let his tail drag miserably across the ground. The trees and bushes in the woods around him faded into a rainbow-colored blur as memories of his closest friend flooded his mind.

The King and Queen's meeting had passed by in a blur. All he could remember was feeling the eyes of the forest animals piercing into his dull fur, hearing the strong, deceptively confident voice of the King and Queen ringing out through the clearing, and longing to see Saderia standing beside him. The King and Queen had announced how he, the Prince of the forest, was going willingly into the fortress and waited until the surprise in the animals' eyes had gradually melted into acceptance. Knowing the forest's own Prince was willing to go, the animals had slowly warmed up to the idea. Dash sat by as the turmoil died down and thought about Saderia until he had finished serving his purpose as an example and let himself be led away by Karenisha and Makero.

Apologies spilled out of their mouths the instant they were out of earshot of the forest animals. Dash tried to smile and told them it was all right, but he doubted any of them believed him. After a while, he fell silent. He just smiled to let them know he forgave them and tried not to look at them and see the grief in their eyes.

Even though he knew Karenisha and Makero were only doing what they thought was best, he couldn't help but feel a tingle of betrayal. Bringing him to the fortress out of fairness to the others was one thing, but that was hardly the main reason they had done it. Was he really only useful as an example to convince the others? Letting out a soft sigh, he tried to push away the bitterness. He could forgive them for what they had done to him. What was harder to forgive was what they had done to Saderia. He could still taste the fury he had felt when he had seen the pain they had caused her. He shivered when he remembered the cold fear that had turned his boiling blood to ice later on when he learned their plans. The thought of being locked up with a bunch of sick strangers was terrifying, but he had forced himself to think through their logic. It might be a cruel plan, but he knew that it was the only plan they had, and it could turn out to be a smart plan.

"Dash," Makero murmured. "You know we don't want to do this."

Dash looked up tiredly and gave a weak nod. "Yes, Makero."

“You know we think of you as...as our own son, right?” he went on. “And that there is no other reason we’re doing this other than because we have to?”

Dash sighed, but nodded obediently. “Yes, Makero. I know that. I understand.”

“Good,” Karenisha murmured, while Makero let out a relieved sigh. The Queen glanced at Dash and took a deep breath. “We’ll be there soon... Please try to get better.”

Dash nodded silently and tried not to bristle. As if he didn’t want to get better. As if he wasn’t trying with every last bit of strength he had to get better to see Saderia.

Shaking off his bitterness, he painfully lifted his head to see what was in front of him and froze in shock. Outlined by the multicolor leaves of the trees was a monstrous barrier. Fallen trees and rotten logs laid on top of each other, forming a wall that spread out in a wide arc to surround the entire clearing. Gigantic boulders and rocks were pushed in around the wall to fill in the gaps. At the very back of the massive wall towered the huge stone den that had served as the warehouse. Sitting in front of the crooked fortress was a huge boulder ready to seal the wide, gaping hole that served as an entrance.

Dash took a deep, shaky breath and forced himself to follow Karenisha and Makero over to the huge entrance. His heart beat rapidly in his chest when he found himself standing just in front of the enormous wall. At a soft nudge from Karenisha and Makero, he stumbled past the entrance into the center of the fortress. Turning around, he stared out at where Karenisha and Makero were waiting just outside the wall.

“This is where we leave you, Dash,” Karenisha murmured. “The last blankets that Cia and Jash were working on are still in the warehouse. The sick will probably bring their own blankets, so you can take what you need. You’ll have to help everybody settle in and watch the entrance to make sure no one tries to escape. When everybody is inside, we’ll seal the entrance. After that, Makero and I will take turns keeping watch just outside the entrance to the fortress. If you ever need us, all you have to do is call.”

“We can give messages to Saderia,” Makero added. “Just tell us what to tell her.”

Dash's hopes lifted. "All right." He took a deep breath. "Good luck, guys."

Karenisha and Makero smiled and turned around to leave, then paused. Before he could ask what was wrong, they glanced back at him and dipped their heads in respect. Dash blinked in surprise as Karenisha murmured, "We are forever in debt to you, Dash. Please forgive us for what we have to put you through."

He blinked in shock. "Of course I forgive you. You don't owe me anything."

Karenisha nodded sadly and slowly turned to walk away beside Makero. As they padded back toward the woods, he thought he heard her mutter under her breath. "I cannot believe he has Dastarius's blood."

Dash watched them until they disappeared behind the thick wall of greenery. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to abandon any dark thoughts of running away. Not knowing what to do, he padded restlessly toward the foreboding warehouse, pushing away painful memories of the time he and Saderia had spent investigating it. Poking his head around the corner, he scanned the inside of the warehouse. Thin blankets were spread out in rows all throughout the den. Other than the blankets, the rest of the den was empty. Taking a step back out, he decided it would be best to sleep outside under the stars rather than enclosed in the den with the tang of sickness thick in the air.

Trying not to shiver when he pictured the sick animals he would be living with, he padded over to the entrance and paused. Through the dense woods, he could see flashes of tawny orange, spotted fur. Narrowing his eyes, he peered more intently into the brush and realized the first wave of ill animals had arrived—the leopards.

Karenisha and Makero emerged from behind a thick layer of undergrowth, followed by hordes of tired-looking leopards. Sitting back to the side, Dash watched as the leopards flowed in through the entrance, their eyes lifeless and absent. Blankets were slung over their backs, hanging over their dull, unruly fur. He watched as the leopards spread out through the fortress. A few poked around to investigate nearby nooks and crannies while others flopped down on the ground and closed their eyes.

Scanning the full clearing, he searched for familiar faces and paused when he spotted Maeta standing by the entrance with Tawny at her paws

and Loki close beside her. Even from a distance, he could read the worry in Loki's eyes. Wondering uneasily if the cheetah had fallen ill, he moved unnoticeably closer to hear what they were saying.

"You'll do fine, Loki," Maeta murmured, giving her a stern gaze. "You took over for me during the flood—you'll just have to do it again while I'm here."

Loki flicked her tail nervously. "But what if you don't come back?"

"Then get your family to help. Now go home. If you would like to say goodbye to Lisa, that's fine, but then I want you out. I can't risk you catching the sickness."

Loki let out a long sigh and nodded. "Yes, Maeta." Casting one last glance back at the entrance, she whirled around to race deeper into the fortress and almost smacked into Dash. Her eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed with a dull tinge of worry.

"Oh," she murmured. "Dash. I...I guess Karenisha and Makero weren't lying when they said you would be here."

He sighed. "No, they weren't lying...So Lisa's here? You're not sick, right?"

"No, I'm not sick. It took a lot, but I convinced Maeta and your parents—I mean..." She looked away awkwardly. "Sorry, I mean, Karenisha and Makero. I convinced them and Maeta to let me come with Lisa to say one final goodbye. I wanted to help her. She's not doing well." She hesitated. "Dash, could you...look after her? Maeta told me she would, but Maeta has to look after Tawny, so can you look after her, too?"

"Of course." Dash gave her a weak smile. "I'll watch out for her. Where is she?"

"Right over there." Loki gestured toward a spot close to the warehouse. Following her gaze, Dash spotted a tiny leopard sitting close to the warehouse next to a few other leopards, looking lonely and unsure. His heart sank when he realized how much worse Lisa looked. Her ribs jutted out through ragged tufts of dull orange fur and her eyes were dull and tired. Her paws shook underneath her, as if the effort of standing was too much.

Dash swallowed nervously and watched her closely as Loki raced toward her in a blur of yellow and tawny spots. Glancing around, Dash took a deep breath, then slowly turned back to see Loki standing close beside Lisa, murmuring something he couldn't catch. After a hesitation, he padded

toward them, not wanting to interrupt. The two of them looked up at the sound of his paw steps and gave him a weak smile.

Lisa looked down shyly. "Oh, hi, Dash. Loki was just telling me you were going to look after me." She giggled in embarrassment. "You don't have to."

"No, it's nothing," Dash said solemnly. "I'll take care of you as best as I can."

"You know Dash." Loki grinned. "He can't survive unless he's helping someone."

Lisa managed a weak, grateful smile. "All right." She paused. "How's Saderia?"

Dash looked down at his paws and let out a sigh. "She's fine... She'll be fine."

"Loki!" The three of them looked up sharply at the sound of Maeta's stern call. "Go on home now! You've had time to say goodbye!"

Loki let out a long sigh, her ears drooping. "Well," she murmured. "I suppose this is goodbye then. Sort of. I...I'm sure I'll be seeing you two again." She took a deep breath and gave them a weak nod. "Goodbye, Lisa. Goodbye, Dash."

"Goodbye, Loki," they murmured as she turned and trailed away. Loki cast one last glance back at them before she reluctantly turned around and bounded stiffly away from the fortress. Her spotted tail disappeared into the dense woods a moment later.

Lisa took a deep breath and let it out slowly to calm herself down. Turning to Dash, she gave him a shaky smile. "Thanks for offering to help me, Dash, but I just want to be on my own for a while. I'm going to go check out the inside of the warehouse."

"Okay," he murmured, flicking her softly with his tail. "Call me if you need me."

She smiled, then stumbled toward the warehouse. Her wheezing breath faded away when she slipped past a group of leopards and vanished into the crowd.

Taking a deep breath, he staggered toward the front of the fortress and sat back before the gaping entrance. Ignoring the pain in his limbs, he cleared his scratchy throat and raised his voice to be heard over the quiet murmur of conversation. "All right!" he called. "Now that we're in here, we



are not allowed to leave, but we will all be fine if we stay calm. There are blankets in the den if you need extra warmth. You can sleep inside or outside, whichever you prefer. Maeta and some of the other healers outside the fortress will continue making attempts at finding a cure, but until then we'll just have to be strong and cooperate with them and with the King and Queen for the good of us and the forest."

The animals gathered in front of him nodded, their tired eyes half-heartedly scanning the inside of the fortress. Sitting back near the entrance to block the way, Dash absently watched the others, searching the crowd for any sign of someone in need of help. A few of the leopards staggered off toward the warehouse to investigate. Several of them formed a crowd just in front of the rocky entrance, passing back blankets from the head of the crowd to those gathered in the back. Some of the leopards disappeared into the old warehouse to sleep in the peaceful darkness inside. Others sought out a comfortable spot on the smooth grass and flopped down to rest in a heap of dirty fur and wheezing breath.

Trying to distract himself from the pounding pain building in his head, Dash let his gaze sweep across the clearing. His dull, sleepy eyes landed on Maeta and traced her movements around the fortress. Carrying a rough grass basket filled with strangely colored herbs and plants, she padded over to several of the leopards and offered them a few of her herbs. Many of the animals meekly shook their heads, but when one of them offered a desperate nod, Maeta carefully leaned down and placed the basket on the ground to search for the right one. With the basket on the ground, Dash could see why she was being so careful with it. Cuddled in a thin blanket in the center of the basket and surrounded by herbs was Maeta's tiny niece, Tawny. The cub's eyes were squeezed shut, but a slight smile spread across her face as she snuggled into the blanket.

Dash's eyelids drooped with sleepiness. When he blinked the tiredness away, Maeta had already picked up the basket and padded away, leaving behind a stack of herbs at the leopard's feet. Looking around, Dash spotted a few leopards pacing restlessly back and forth, their eyes streaming with fearful tears. A few animals stood nearby, trying desperately to calm down their panicking friends. Maeta darted toward the alarmed animals. Skidding to a halt, the powerful leopard pulled out a strange-looking plant. She handed it to the frightened leopards and instructed them to eat it. When

Dash pricked his ears to listen, he thought he heard her call them ‘tranquilizing herbs.’ A few moments after swallowing the herbs, the animal sank into a peaceful sleep.

Tearing his gaze off Maeta, Dash stared out at all of the weak, dirty leopards and felt his heart ache in his chest. Which of the animals in front of him wouldn’t make it out of the fortress to see their friends and family? How many of them might leave behind loved ones, the way Tawny had been left behind after the death of her mother?

Taking a deep breath, he tried to shake the thoughts out of his mind, but even though he tried not to panic, he couldn’t help but look toward the entrance. The giant, sinister boulder towered just outside the den, waiting to be pushed in front of the entrance to block the way. In the hour it would take to round up the rest of the sick animals, they would be locked in. Which one of the animals would make it? Which would never see the outside world again? Staring at the cold, threatening boulder, he couldn’t help but fear he might never see Saderia again. What if *he* never came out?

# Chapter Sixteen

## Desperation

“Well, even if it isn’t right, you have to admit it’s convenient having all of the food down here where we can get it.”

Jeb looked up at the sound of the cool voice and spotted the outlaw that had spoken. Citcha stood near the edge of the Spring basin, gazing down at the bottom. A huge, colorful pile of fruit laid in the basin, rising up so high any of the outlaws could touch it. Bright moonlight shimmered down on the ripe pieces thrown on the top while the rest of the tall pile remained shadowed in the darkness that covered the Spring. Citcha stared eagerly down at the fruit with gleaming, hungry blue eyes and licked her lips.

Telku stood in front of her, his eyes wide with desperation. “Don’t you think we should return this?” he pleaded, gesturing to the pile. “We have no right to take it.”

Citcha snorted. “Are you out of your mind? Secka would kill us for taking it. Either him or the creatures. I might feel bad, but not bad enough to die.” Rolling her eyes, the thief pushed past him and stalked toward the back of the cave, leaving Telku standing on the edge of the basin. A hopeless look of defeat clouded his narrowed eyes.

Jeb cautiously darted forward to stand by his father. “Dad? Are you okay?”

Telku heaved a sigh and shook his head. “It’s no use. I’ve been trying to convince the others to put the food back on the trees, but they just won’t listen.”

Jeb frowned, feeling a tingle of unease. “So Secka keeps stealing it?”

“Yeah,” Telku muttered. “I’ve been trying to put the fruit back on the trees, but Secka has more followers than we do and they keep bringing it back to the Spring.”

Jeb let out a long sigh and looked down at the enormous pile of fruit towering in the basin in front of him. New pieces of food seemed to appear every day. None of the outlaws bothered to help return it like Jeb and his father had been doing even when the pile was right under their noses. The ever-growing pile of fruit seemed to mock them.

“Stop trying.” Secka’s cool, sneering voice suddenly echoed around the Spring, making Jeb jump and whirl around in alarm. The gray outlaw leapt down from the hole in the ceiling and landed neatly on the stony ground beneath him. His followers jumped down behind him, throwing pieces of fruit onto the pile. Smirking, Secka leapt over the pile of fruit and landed just in front of Jeb. “The others aren’t going to listen to you.”

Telku narrowed his eyes. “Oh, and why not?”

Secka raised an eyebrow. “Kraguers scare easily. With me and the creatures to fear, you have no chance.” A glimmer of interest lit up his gray eyes when they flicked to Jeb. “Hey, Telku, how about going back to your den? I need to talk to Jeb for a minute.”

Telku gritted his teeth and stepped in front of Jeb. “Over my dead body.”

Secka snickered. “That can be arranged.”

“Dad, just go back,” Jeb spoke up quickly, stepping forward to stand beside his father with wide eyes and shaky paws. “I’ll be fine. Just go. Please.”

Telku narrowed his eyes and glanced nervously back and forth between Jeb and Secka. After a long moment, he reluctantly began to slink away toward his cave den, never taking his eyes off them until he disappeared into the shadows.

“Well,” Secka muttered, “now that he’s gone, we have some things to discuss.” He cut his eyes at Jeb and calmly curled his tail over his paws. “You can start.”

“I don’t know anything,” Jeb muttered, his fur bristling. “Zerone doesn’t trust me and Keruni hates me. You’re asking the wrong animal to spy for you.”

Secka let out an annoyed sigh. “Then work harder to get them to like you. Pretend like you’re on their side or something.” He hesitated for a long moment. “How about I give you something to tell them? You can pretend like you’re giving them information.”

Jeb blinked and felt his heart leap with hope. Maybe if he told Zerone what Secka said, the Emperor would stop bothering him. “All right. What should I tell him?”

Secka frowned at his sudden, excited tone of voice, then narrowed his eyes in thought. A cold sneer spread across his face. “Tell him I’m planning to take a few outlaws to raid a tree for fruit right outside the clearing where the spotted creatures live.”

Jeb blinked in confusion. His lie seemed oddly specific. “The spotted ones?”

“Yeah, the fast spotted ones,” Secka murmured. “Tell Zerone the tree we’re going to raid is right beside a pink bush. He can’t see the fruit from the ground, but if he gets into the tree, there will be plenty of food. Tell him if he gets up into the tree and waits, he can ambush us. Tell him to stand directly in front of the tree in the pink bush around its trunk to get up into the tree. That way he’ll think he might be able to stop it. Got it? Right under the tree.”

“Right under the tree,” Jeb repeated, frowning. What did it matter where he stood?

“Okay, good, good. Don’t tell Zerone, though. Tell his daughter first.” Secka’s eyes gleamed with an eerie light. “She seemed kind of upset at the last meeting and she’s got the Emperor wrapped around her finger. Tell her about the raid and that it will make the creatures starve. She’ll go running to her ‘Daddy’ and he’ll do whatever she says.”

Jeb flattened his ears and felt a sharp sting of guilt, but nodded anyway. “Got it.” Narrowing his eyes, he tried to push away his unease about dragging Keruni into it.

“Good. Now get going. Tell your father you’re going to sneak some fruit back up like he’s been doing or something like that. I don’t really care.” Secka apathetically flicked his tail, then gave Jeb a long, dark glance. After a long hesitation, he stalked away toward his group of followers waiting near the shadowed wall of the cave.

Jeb let out a long, heavy sigh and slowly pushed himself to his paws. Feeling uneasy, he trailed nervously toward his cave den and poked his head around the corner. “Dad? I’m going up to the surface for a while. To, uh, put some fruit back on the trees.”

Telku looked up and frowned. "Jeb, you don't have to do that. I'll take care of it."

Jeb shook his head rapidly. "No, no, it's fine. I...I'll be back as soon as I can."

Telku hesitated, then gave him a slight nod. "All right. Just be careful."

Jeb nodded and ducked out of the den. Looking around at the shadowed Spring, he turned toward the fruit stacked in the basin and lunged forward to grab a piece to prove his alibi. Holding the fruit tightly and trying to ignore a tingle of guilt, he leapt toward the hole in the ceiling to find Keruni. Secka's dark eyes bored into his back the whole way.

Jeb's fur prickled as he raced through the shadowy woods. His mind whirled when he wondered how he was going to find Keruni without finding Zerone. His eyes scanned his surroundings for any sign of creatures or Zerone's prissy daughter, but the woods seemed as empty as ever. Plowing through a clump of bushes, he raced into the wide clearing where the meetings had taken place and smacked right into a tiny kraguer.

"Ouch!" Keruni's sharp, furious voice split the air as he stumbled back, clutching his head. Blinking rapidly, Jeb tried to shake off the pain and looked up to see Keruni glaring at him with blazing green eyes. "Would it kill you to watch where you're going?"

"Would it kill you to be nice?" he snapped. He blinked when his senses returned and rapidly looked around for Zerone. His heart leapt when he realized the clearing was empty, but he faced Keruni with narrowed eyes. "What are you doing out here alone?"

Keruni sniffed. "I came out here to keep a lookout for you. No, Daddy doesn't know I left the Court, but he's exhausted, so he shouldn't worry about me anyway."

Jeb frowned. "And where is he?"

"Sleeping."

Jeb's eyes widened. "In a crisis?"

She bristled. "It's not a crisis and not sleeping is not going to help!"

"Okay," Jeb relented, holding up a paw and suppressing a sigh. "I guess you're right. Anyway, I, uh, I have some new information to give you."

“Well, spit it out already,” she snapped, narrowing her eyes.

Jeb frowned in indignation, then hesitated. Lying had never been easy. He stared at Keruni for ages before looking down. “Secka’s going to raid a tree. It’s...it’s near the clearing where the fast spotted creatures live by a pink bush. Something about if you stand directly under the tree, you’ll be able to get up to plan an ambush or something.”

Keruni frowned. “But he’s always raiding trees.”

“But...” Jeb broke off, searching for words to make it work. “But... this is one of the last trees with fruit. The creatures...well, they might starve to death any day now.”

Keruni blinked in shock, her green eyes growing wide with horror. A blank, distant look suddenly flickered across her gleaming eyes, seeming to dull them and make them seem clouded and absent. She sat in silence for what felt like ages, but when she finally spoke up, her voice sounded soft and dream-like. “They could die?”

Jeb stared at her with wide eyes, feeling a jolt of alarm at her strange, sudden change of mood. Part of him longed to tell her it was a lie to get her to return to normal, but he found himself nodding miserably, knowing he couldn’t reveal the truth now.

Fearful tears glistened in her eyes. Whirling around, she darted toward the edge of the clearing, letting out a cry. “Daddy! He’s going to kill them! You have to stop him!”

Jeb tried to hide a glimmer of fear and unease in his wide blue and green eyes. His heart suddenly beat faster with alarm when he realized how badly he had scared Keruni and how furious Zerone might be when he found out. A jolt of fear shot through his body. Why exactly had he gone along with Secka’s plan? Wouldn’t they find out he was lying?

The sound of paws thudding against the ground suddenly filled the air. Jeb looked up sharply to see Keruni burst out of the bushes, her eyes still wide with terror. Shivering with fear, she raced forward and skidded to a halt in front of him. Behind her, Zerone leapt out of the bushes and looked around wildly, his gray and green eyes locking on Jeb. Fury glimmered in his dark eyes and a low growl rumbled in his throat.

“Jeb!” he roared, making the trees around him shudder at the sound.

Jeb winced and shivered, shrinking back against the ground. “Y-yes, Zerone?”

“It’s *Emperor!*” Zerone roared. “Jeb, what did you tell my daughter?”

“I told you!” Keruni exclaimed. “The gray guy’s going to raid the tree! You have to get under the tree to ambush them and if you don’t stop it, the creatures are going to die! You can’t send your army because they’re wimps! It has to be you!”

Zerone narrowed his eyes. “And why is that?”

“I just told you!” Keruni burst out, her tail swishing frantically back and forth. “The others are too afraid to set foot outside, much less go near a creature clearing! They’re terrified of the creatures, the outlaws, and anything that makes a sound!”

Zerone watched her for a long time, his eyes growing darker. After a long moment, he slowly turned to face Jeb. “Why did you tell Keruni this?” he whispered.

Jeb shrank back against the ground. “B-Because you weren’t here and she was?”

Zerone’s eyes flashed with rage, and before Jeb could speak, the Emperor drew back a paw and unsheathed his claws. Jeb let out a gasp and froze, but before Zerone could smack him, Keruni grabbed his paw. “No, Daddy! He’s trying to help!” she cried.

“He is not!” the Emperor roared, gritting his teeth in fury.

“Yes, he is! If not us, then he’s helping the creatures!” Keruni narrowed her eyes and held on tightly to his paw. “Don’t hurt him!”

Jeb stared at her with wide eyes and gazed up in Zerone in horror. The Emperor glared at him with eyes burning with hatred before finally yanking his paw away from his daughter and setting it back down. His fur bristled and he ignored the look of relief on Keruni’s face. Taking a step closer, he let out a dangerous growl. “All right, Jeb, you’ll go unharmed tonight.” He bared his fangs. “But if you *ever* upset my daughter again...”

“I won’t,” Jeb whimpered, trying not to shiver. Why hadn’t he thought this plan through? Heaving a sigh, he tried to relax, but he couldn’t help but feel a stab of guilt. He wasn’t even trying to help the creatures. The only one he was trying to help was himself, while Secka reaped the benefits. He didn’t even know whose side he was on anymore.

“Keruni,” Zerone muttered, “I’ll go, but I’ll bring some of my followers with me to that tree to make sure it’s safe. You stay home and



don't leave the palace."

Keruni let out a sigh of relief and seemed to relax. "Thanks, Daddy," she sniffed. Turning around, she lifted her tail up into the air and darted toward the woods surrounding the clearing to race back to her father's Court.

Zerone watched her until she disappeared into the shadows of the woods, then slowly turned back to face Jeb with a dark, cold glare. "You'll have your wish," he muttered. "I will check out this tree, Jeb." His eyes narrowed and a dark growl rumbled in his throat. "You had better hope the information you gave me is valid."

Blackness seemed to swallow Jeb up the instant he leapt down into the hole leading down to the Spring, making his heart skip in alarm. In less than a second, his paws smacked against the cold ground and he stumbled forward, closing his eyes in pain. When he finally looked up to find his cave den, he jumped and let out a yelp of alarm.

Secka stood just inches in front of him, glaring at him. "Did you tell him?"

Jeb shivered and tried to calm the frantic pounding of his heart. Nodding miserably, he tried to hide a whimper and felt almost exhausted. "Yes! Yes, I told him!"

Secka narrowed his eyes. "About going under the tree?"

"Yes, I told him that part, too! The part about the pink bush... everything!"

Secka seemed to relax. "Good. Now get away from me. You bore me."

Jeb blinked at him in surprise and hesitated before whirling around and darting toward the edge of the basin. His fur prickled with fear and unease at how weird everything seemed, but he tried to ignore it and leapt over the rising pile of fruit filling the empty spring. Ignoring the harsh click of his claws on the rocky floor, he raced toward the jagged entrance of his den and lunged inside. Telku and Jati looked up at him in surprise and alarm when he staggered to the ground.

"What's wrong with you?" Jati exclaimed, staring at his terrified expression.

Telku cut his eyes at her and sighed. “What she means to say is: are you all right?”

“Yeah,” Jeb panted, barely noticing his mother send a glare in his father’s direction. “Yeah...yeah, everything’s fine.” His eyelids drooped with tiredness and his whole body suddenly felt weak with exhaustion after so many strange things had happened. A tingle of guilt and fear lingered in his chest, but before he could give any thought to the conversation he had had with Zerone and Keruni, he collapsed onto the cold floor. Before he even realized what had happened, he had already fallen asleep.

A loud, booming voice suddenly burst through the silence of the Spring, jolting Jeb out of sleep. His eyes shot open in alarm and his heart stopped in terror as the furious voice echoed around the rocky underground cavern. Leaping to his paws, he looked around wildly and felt his fur begin to bristle in terror. His heart suddenly beat frantically as the earsplitting snarl rang out, filling the entire Spring with a raw, furious roar.

“Where is he? Where is the traitor?”

Jeb’s eyes widened in horror when he recognized the voice, and before he could think about what was happening, he staggered toward the entrance of the den. A shiver raced up his spine when he stared out at the dark Spring. Blackness covered the entire underground and the silver glow of moonlight shining down from the ceiling was hidden by the outline of a kraguer. Even through the darkness, Jeb could see outlaws poking their heads out through the rocky entrances of their cave dens in alarm. Telku and Jati silently slid up beside him to peek out into the cavern, their eyes narrowed in curiosity. Jeb almost jumped when an outlaw stepped out from an alcove at the back of the Spring.

Secka calmly stepped out of the blackness and looked up at the entrance. “Good evening, Zerone. Which traitor would you be referring to? There are a dozen down here.”

The Emperor let out a low growl and lunged down into the Spring, his dirt-covered fur bristling. A low growl rumbled in his throat and he looked around wildly. The outlaws let out gasps of alarm and fled to their dens. A few let out enraged hisses.

“You can’t come down here!” one of them shouted. “This is *our* Spring!”

Ignoring their yells, Zerone pushed past Secka and stepped into the center of the cave. “Move, Secka, I don’t have time for you,” he growled, his eyes gleaming with rage.

“How kind.” Secka raised an eyebrow. “What are you doing here, Zerone?”

“It’s *Emperor Zerone!*” he bellowed. Shivers raced down Jeb’s spine when his furious shout echoed around the Spring, but the Emperor barely noticed the harsh sound of his own voice. “Where is Jeb?” he demanded, rounding on Secka. “Tell me now!”

“He’s over there,” Secka said with a shrug, flicking his tail toward Jeb’s den.

The Emperor whirled around to look toward the entrance of the cave den and locked eyes with Jeb. A low, dangerous snarl rumbled in Zerone’s throat, while Jeb’s eyes widened in fear. Before he could try to hide, Zerone stalked toward him, letting his claws scrape across the stone floor. Secka stood behind him, watching with the same bored look he always had. The moment Zerone turned his back on him, though, the dull look vanished and an angry, dangerous gleam suddenly lit up his narrowed gray eyes.

Jeb looked back in surprise, then looked up to see the Emperor stop in front of his den, towering over him. He gulped when the Emperor let out a low growl. “Z-Zerone?”

Zerone shook with fury. “You...liar!” His harsh voice boomed out around the Spring, making the walls tremble and a handful of pebbles tumble down from the ceiling.

“Zerone!” Telku stepped forward. “How dare you? You have no right to—“

“Step aside, Telku, you half-wit!” Zerone snarled, shoving him out of the way with a rough smack of his paw. Before Telku could catch himself, Zerone stalked forward, grabbed Jeb’s paw, and yanked him out of his cave den into the open. “You...” Zerone narrowed his eyes and dropped his voice to a cold whisper. “You traitor! You led me straight into a trap and maybe even my death if I hadn’t had my guards to help me!”

Jeb’s eyes widened in shock. “What?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know!” Zerone lashed his tail. “First you upset Keruni because you *knew* she would run to me! Then you led me to

that stupid tree and right underneath it was a *pitfall*! If I had been alone, I would have died! Just like you wanted!”

The color drained out of Jeb’s face. A *pitfall*? Had he almost sent someone to their death? “I...I swear...” he gasped. “I...I didn’t know...”

“A likely story!”

“Hey!” Jati suddenly leapt out of the den to stand in front of Jeb, her fur bristling in fury. “If you talk to my son that way again, I’ll rip your face off with my claws!”

Zerone curled his lip. “Don’t you threaten me, you insufferable little...”

FLASH! Jati’s claws smacked across Zerone’s face before he could finish his sentence, making him stumble back with a cry of pain. Tiny droplets of blood splattered the ground. Zerone looked up with a cold growl, his face marred with long claw marks.

“Jati!” Telku exclaimed, gaping at the smug, satisfied expression on her face.

Zerone glared daggers at Jeb’s mother and faced her with a furious, dangerous glint in his narrowed eyes. When a tiny stream of blood trickled past his face, he gritted his teeth in rage and raised a clawed paw to strike back. Telku instantly lunged forward to block Jati from view, while Jeb stood frozen to the spot in terror.

“Hey, hey, hey, what’s with all the violence?” Before anyone could attack, Secka’s casual voice sounded from across the Spring.

Zerone whipped around to see him sitting calmly behind him. A snarl rumbled in his throat. “Stay out of this, you disgusting disgrace!”

Secka chuckled. “You sure like to hurl the insults today, Zerone. What seems to be the problem?”

The Emperor narrowed his eyes. “I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

Secka raised an eyebrow. “I think it is. I happen to run this Spring and *you* are not allowed. You’re lucky I haven’t forced you to leave yet for trespassing.”

“Forced me to...?” Zerone let out a laugh. “You forget who you’re talking to.”

Secka snickered. “No, not really. I believe I’m talking to a coward who throws the title Emperor around to hide behind. Along with his

minions.”

Zerone blinked and narrowed his eyes. “What did you say to me?”

“Are you deaf?”

The Emperor gritted his teeth. “You think you can do a better job?”

The gray outlaw raised an eyebrow. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I do.”

Zerone opened his mouth to make a sharp retort, then paused and reluctantly turned away from him. “This isn’t about you,” he snarled. “It’s about this traitor—” he whirled around to glare at Jeb “—who tried to lead me to my death!”

“*Surely* you’re exaggerating,” Secka murmured, his eyes glinting.

“There was a pitfall right underneath that tree,” Zerone snarled. “Secka, were you planning to raid a tree outside the clearing of the spotted creatures by a pink bush?”

Secka frowned and wrinkled his nose. “Of course not. I don’t even think I noticed a pink bush over there the last time. I was in the other part of the forest tonight.”

Zerone narrowed his eyes at Jeb. “Well? What have you to say in your defense?”

Jeb opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. His eyes grew wide with dismay. “I...I...” He struggled for some sort of defense, but he had nothing. The truth would do him no good. If he told Zerone he had lied to him to help the outlaw Zerone had asked him to spy on, he would only be digging his grave deeper. “N-nothing, Zerone,” he finally choked out, shrinking back against the ground.

“Zerone,” Telku spoke up, stepping forward with wide, desperate eyes. “*Emperor* Zerone. I don’t know what’s going on, but Jeb would never do anything to hurt anybody.”

The Emperor growled. “He’s a traitor who tried to kill me.”

“He would never...”

“You’re a liar, too!” Zerone shouted. “Jeb agreed to spy for me...”

“*What?*” Secka looked up sharply, his eyes growing wide with shock and fury.

Telku blinked in shock, while Jati seemed stunned. “Wh-what?” he stammered.

“I didn’t agree to it!” Jeb choked out, narrowing his eyes in dismay. “I...I was forced into it! Zerone gave me no choice and I haven’t even been

spying for him..."

"So you admit you're a traitor!" Zerone snarled.

Jeb shivered and shrank back. "No, I haven't been spying for anyone..."

"Oh, so you're a traitor to both sides, huh?" Secka faced him with a calm, mild glance, but a dark, dangerous glint gleamed in his dark gray eyes.

Jeb gazed at him in horror. "No!" he exclaimed. "You don't understand..."

"Wait, a traitor to both sides?" Zerone cut him off and frowned in confusion, casting a baffled glance at Secka. "What does that mean?"

Secka shrugged. "Oh, it's interesting actually. See, I thought Jeb was my spy..."

"I'm not anyone's spy!" Jeb burst out. "Why won't you both leave me alone?"

Telku gritted his teeth and flicked his tail. "Jeb, get inside. We'll handle this."

"No, that's not going to happen," Zerone snarled, whipping back around to glare at him. "It's about time he stopped hiding behind everything and everyone." His eyes flashed in the dim light. "You're going to stay here, Jeb, and you're going to pay."

"But I didn't do anything!" He gazed fearfully back and forth between Secka and Zerone and saw only furious faces staring back at him. His heart beat wildly and he crouched against the ground, wanting to melt away. He couldn't tell which side was scarier.

"Zerone!" Telku let out a low growl. "I've had enough! Leave my son alone!"

Zerone gritted his teeth and glared back and forth between Jeb and Telku. His lip curled in disgust. "I should have known you would be too selfish to take the hit yourself." Jeb winced at his icy tone, while Zerone let out a snarl. "Don't ever come around me or Keruni ever again. If you do, you'll pay severely. Maybe even with your life." Giving Jeb one last glare, he whirled around and stalked away from him. Lunging past the pile of food, the Emperor leapt up toward the entrance and disappeared into the darkness above.

Silence fell over the Spring. Telku stood tensely in front of Jeb, staring after Zerone. Secka sat just a few feet away, staring at Jeb with an emotionless expression. The eerie look sent shivers down Jeb's spine when he tried to meet the gray outlaw's gaze.

"Secka?" Telku finally broke the silence with a soft, tense whisper. "What have you and Zerone been using my son for?"

Secka shrugged. "Nothing, Telku. But I do need to talk to Jeb for a moment."

Telku's fur bristled, while Jati let out a hiss. "You'll do no such thing!"

Secka raised an eyebrow. "Jeb? Do you want there to be a fight?"

"No!" Jeb's eyes widened in horror. "No more fighting! *Please!*"

"Then come here. I'm not going to hurt you." He glanced at Telku and curled his lip. "Not with your father around, at least."

Jeb tried to swallow his fear, but his legs shook so badly he didn't know if he could walk. He felt weak with terror. Feeling his heart beat rapidly in his chest, he hesitated, then slowly took a step toward Secka, ignoring his parents' looks of shock.

Secka turned around and calmly led him over to the edge of the Spring. When they were a good distance away from Jeb's parents, he dropped his voice to a whisper. "Did I forget to mention that you were supposed to tell Zerone to go alone to investigate?"

Jeb shivered. "Yes..." He hesitated. "Secka...did you know that pitfall was there?"

Secka raised an eyebrow. "What if I did?"

Jeb's eyes widened in horror. "You...you were trying to kill Zerone?"

Secka scoffed. "So what if I was?" He smirked at Jeb's stunned expression. "Why do you think I went along with those little meetings? I did it in the hopes that Zerone would get caught by the creatures or that I would get a chance to kill him myself."

Jeb's eyes widened in horror and a wave of cold washed over him. "Why?"

"I have my reasons." Secka snickered and sneered at him. "I just want him dead. And now that Zerone has forbidden you to go near him again, you won't be able to tell him any of this to warn him. Not to mention

the fact that if you ever try it, *I* will kill you.” His eyes darkened and a scowl spread across his face. “Don’t try to warn Zerone, Jeb, or you’ll pay dearly for it.” He raised an eyebrow while Jeb shivered. “Do you understand?”

Jeb hesitated for a long moment and stared up into his dark, dangerous gray eyes before finally giving him a shaky nod. “Yes, I understand.”

Moonlight glinted off the enormous boulder sealing the fortress. Dash shivered in the frigid night air, unable to tear his gaze away from the intimidating boulder towering in front of the entrance. His hopes seemed to sink with every moment that passed staring at the rock and knowing he was sealed in for the eternity it might take to recover.

Glancing up at the sky, he could only just make out the silver glow of the moon. With a long sigh, he pushed himself to his paws and tried not to stumble. Exhaustion dragged him down with every breath he took after the hours he had endured ushering in new waves of sick animals, but no matter how hard he had tried, he could not fall asleep even when night fell. Pain and worry had kept him awake for hours.

Picking his way around sleeping animals, he headed toward the boulder sealing him in. His paws ached with pain and his legs shook with weakness even when he tried to walk slowly. When he finally reached the sealed entrance, he sat back and leaned against the hard, freezing boulder to catch his breath. For several moments, he stared at the boulder and thought about what might be happening on the other side until his fear and worry grew too much to hide. Keeping his voice a low whisper, he pressed against the rock and called the names of his foster parents. “Karenisha? Makero? Are you there?”

Several moments passed with no answer. Smothered by the silence of the fortress, Dash began to wonder if they had already left until a soft voice answered him.

“Dash?” breathed Karenisha’s quiet voice. “We’re here. Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine,” he murmured. “I was just wondering if you were still there.”



“We’ll be here for the rest of tonight,” she assured him. “If we leave, it will only be on an emergency call and we’ll leave guards posted. We’ll probably leave guards posted for a while tomorrow, as well, so we can leave to check on things.”

“Okay.” He hesitated. “Have you guys had a chance to see Saderia?”

A long beat of silence spread out between them.

“We haven’t had a chance to go home to see her today,” Makero murmured. “But we’re hoping to get a chance to check on her sometime tomorrow. We’ll let you know how she’s doing if we manage to drop by the house.”

“Would you like us to bring her a message if we do see her?” Karenisha added.

Dash let out a long sigh. Giving Saderia a message would be great, but what could he tell her? How terrifying it was to be locked up in some strange place? How depressing it was to never know who would go home and who wouldn’t? How badly he wanted to go home? He took a deep breath. “Just tell her I miss her...that things are fine...Lisa’s doing well...and I feel fine, too...” He tried not to wince. “Tell her everything’s fine.”

“All right,” Makero murmured. “As soon as we get a chance, we’ll give her your message. When we get back, we’ll bring any messages from her.”

“Thank you,” Dash murmured, staring down at his paws and shivering.

“Goodnight, Dash,” Karenisha called softly.

He sighed. “Goodnight, guys.”

Silence followed his words.

Taking a deep breath, he padded restlessly away from the boulder. Sleeping animals laid spread out on the grass, wrapped up in blankets and covered by the dark shadow of the warehouse. Measly piles of food laid close by their sides. Close to one of the outer walls of the fortress, he spotted Tawny sleeping peacefully next to her aunt’s belly, her tail curled tightly around her nose and her face half-buried in Maeta’s side. The hoarse breathing of the sick animals was the only sound in the silence of the night.

Looking around, he moved toward the warehouse. He glanced around at all of the sleeping animals for any sign of Lisa, wondering if she was okay. After promising Loki he would look after her, he knew he should

keep his word and make sure she was fine. Poking his head around the entrance of the warehouse, he spotted her lying close to the back wall. Taking a deep breath, he crept silently into the warehouse, trying not to gag on the overwhelming tang of sickness hanging in the air. Being careful not to wake anybody up, he picked his way past rows of sleeping animals until he finally reached the back.

Lisa lay weakly against the cold, rocky ground, her legs splayed out in all directions. Her eyes squeezed tightly shut, she tossed and turned fitfully across the stone, scraping her claws across it. A soft whimper breathed out of her throat. Dash didn't know if she was being tormented by a nightmare or the sickness. For several moments, he watched her sleep until he turned away, feeling awkward and wishing she was awake to talk. Trying to be quiet, he started to lay down to rest when Lisa's eyes fluttered open. Blinking and narrowing her eyes, she drowsily lifted her head to look at him. "Dash?"

Dash blinked in surprise. "Oh...er, yeah, it's me. I...I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"It's fine." She paused. "What are you doing here? I thought you were outside."

He looked away. "I couldn't sleep. I thought I'd check on you since Loki asked..."

"Oh, okay." She blushed. "You really don't have to do that. I'm fine." She patted the ground. "You can lay down here if you want. Maybe you can try to fall back asleep."

Dash hesitated before carefully lowering himself onto the ground. Letting out a sigh, he looked down and rested his head on his paws, his eyes dull and distant.

Lisa studied him closely with a worried gaze. "Dash...are you okay?"

He glanced up at her and nodded unconvincingly. "I guess so. I just miss Saderia."

Giving him a sympathetic smile, she reached out and placed her paw over his. "I'm sure you'll see her soon. And in the meantime, she'll be all right, won't she?"

Dash just sighed and buried his face in his paws. "I sure hope so."

“Saderia!” Cia padded cautiously over to Saderia’s room and poked her head around the corner to look inside. A lump of dirty, uncared-for orange fur laid slumped against the rocky bed, unmoving apart from the almost unnoticeable rise and fall of her chest. Heaving a long sigh, Cia glanced back to see Uncle Jash hovering uncertainly behind her, then looked at her niece with the same worried look shining in her blue eyes. “Saderia, are you listening? You haven’t eaten all day...we have food for you!”

Saderia didn’t bother to respond or look back. Her eyes stared dully at the wall.

Cia glanced helplessly back at Uncle Jash and heaved an anxious sigh. “She’s just been sitting there staring like that for hours. She should eat...”

He shrugged. “We could just...throw it to her and maybe she’ll eat it later...”

Cia narrowed her eyes. “Well, what if she doesn’t?”

Uncle Jash gave another clueless shrug. “It’s not like we can force her to eat it.”

Cia sighed, putting a paw to her forehead. “My sister’s going to kill me if I let Saderia starve, but I’m clueless as to what to do with her. I’ve always been clueless with kids...”

“Let’s never have them,” Uncle Jash agreed. “I think the best we can do is leave it for her and let her eat it when she’s ready. Eventually she’ll get hungry enough, right?”

“I hope so.” Cia hesitated then reluctantly crept into the dark bedroom to lean down and silently set the fruit down by Saderia’s bed. Looking up, she watched her forlorn niece for a long moment before awkwardly turning around to retreat. She and Uncle Jash stared into the room for a moment longer before slowly padding away.

Saderia barely even noticed the fruit. Her gaze remained locked on the wall. The food and the room around her seemed to fade as she stared into a world of memories that only she could see. Images of Dash’s smiling face from happier times flashed through her mind. Scenes of when she had first met him at school, how he had come to live with her, and the journey through the desert played over and over in her mind, driving a knife deeper into her heart with each sweet memory. What if he never came back to have

more adventures with her and those memories were the only ones she would ever have?

Her eyelids drooped with exhaustion. Last night, she hadn't gotten a wink of sleep. Every time she came close to falling asleep, the unending movie running through her mind had played her another memory of Dash. Drifting in and out of her memories, she barely paid attention to her aunt and uncle's quiet voices murmuring about what was wrong with her until she was startled by the sudden sound of paws scraping stone. She pricked her ears just as Karenisha and Makero's soft voices floated into the room.

Lifting her head, Saderia narrowed her eyes when the King and Queen padded into her room. Her parents paused when they saw her cold gaze. "Saderia?"

"How is he?" she demanded, cutting off her mother. "What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing's wrong," Karenisha assured her. "Dash is all right."

She narrowed her eyes. "Then what are you doing here?"

The Queen took a deep breath. "Dash wanted us to give you a message. He said that he misses you, but that he and Lisa are doing well. He said things are fine over there. He doesn't want you to worry."

Her heart skipped with hope. She wanted to believe it, but a dark thought nagged at her mind. "If Dash really was in trouble or in pain, he would tell me...right?"

They hesitated and exchanged an uneasy glance.

"We think so," the Queen murmured. "If he was in pain, we'd know. Trust me."

Trust her? The momentary pause was all she needed to confirm her fears. Even if Dash sent her a thousand messages, how could she determine what was the truth?

Makero sighed. "He wouldn't want you to just sit around staring at the wall."

She narrowed her eyes and looked away.

Karenisha took a deep breath. "Would you like us to give him a message?"

Saderia pricked her ears with sudden hope, then paused. What could she tell Dash to assure him she was okay and encourage him to tell her what was really happening? What could she do to show him that he could tell her

if something was wrong without upsetting her? Taking a deep breath, she managed to smile up at her parents and sit up in bed. “Tell him I’m fine. Tell him everything’s great and...can I visit Loki tomorrow?”

Her mother blinked in surprise. “Um...sure, but only if Cia or Jash escorts you.”

Saderia grinned. “Great. Tell him I’m going to see Loki tomorrow to hang out together. Oh, and ask him to tell Lisa I’m glad she’s okay.”

“O-Okay...” She frowned in confusion. “I...I’m sure he’ll be glad to hear it.”

Saderia nodded and smiled a bit wider. “I hope.” Without a word, she leapt off her bed and grabbed the fruit. Ignoring her parents’ stunned gazes, she padded out of the room to ask her aunt and uncle to escort her to the Home of the Leopards tomorrow and tried to hide a relieved sigh. If lying to Dash was the only way to get him to tell the truth about how he was doing, so be it. One way or another, she had to be sure he was safe.

# Chapter Seventeen

## Unnecessary Evil

“She says she’s doing fine. She was eating, sleeping well...even smiling.”

Dash blinked at Karenisha’s words and looked up at the boulder in shock. He dropped his tiny piece of food and stared, feeling stunned. “Really? She was smiling?”

“Yes, it took us by surprise,” Makero said. “I guess she’s making the best of this.”

Dash stared at the rock with a perplexed frown. This was supposed to be great news, so why did he feel a twinge of bitterness? After all the tears she had shed before he had left, he had expected her to be miserable. His first nights in the fortress had been plagued with worry about how she was holding up. After hearing that Karenisha and Makero had left last night to visit Saderia, he had spent all night dreading the news they might bring with them. Now he felt his face burn with shame and embarrassment. He had probably overestimated his importance. It was wonderful news that Saderia was feeling better...but why did it seem as if she hardly cared he was gone now that he had left?

Shaking off his bitterness, he sighed. “That’s...great. Tell her I’m fine, too.”

“All right, we’ll tell her the first chance we get,” Karenisha told him.

“Take care,” Makero added.

“Thanks,” he muttered. Silence fell over them and after a moment, he restlessly stumbled away, trying to imagine a smiling, happy Saderia sitting at home. The image didn’t fit. Letting out a long sigh, he tried to push away his thoughts. Around the clearing the animals stretched their legs and let out long yawns. Some of them remained curled up on the grassy floor while others clustered around the trees in the fortress, collecting food. He caught flashes of Maeta weaving in and out of the crowd, checking on the animals and offering herbs from her basket.

He sighed and tried to push away nagging, hurtful thoughts about Saderia. It was a good thing she was doing better. Now that he didn't have to worry too much about her, maybe he could get some sleep at night. Trying to reassure himself, he tried to picture Saderia's smiling face and frowned when the thought still didn't match up. What if this was some sort of trick? What if Saderia was hiding her true feelings from him? He hissed in frustration. How was he going to know how she was really feeling if she wouldn't tell him the truth? Letting out a long sigh, he half-hoped she was faking her happiness and that she really did feel bad about him leaving, then hissed at himself in disgust.

"Stop being selfish," he muttered. He started to push himself to his paws to look around, then let out a cry when someone smacked into his side. His paws staggered across the ground, but before he could try to catch himself, he stumbled forward and collapsed on the grass. A light, furry animal stumbled on top of him, pinning him down. He tried to look up, but before he could move, the animal leapt away from him. Glancing up, he recognized the grayish blue eyes of Lisa and stared up at her spotted face.

Her eyes widened with horror and embarrassment. "Oh, Dash, I'm so sorry! I...I was just coming to see you, but I tripped and...I'm so sorry!"

Suppressing a groan, Dash picked himself off the ground and managed to smile. "It's fine, no harm done. The disease makes you unsteady. It's nothing to worry about."

She smiled gratefully. "Thanks. So what's going on? Any word from Saderia?"

Dash looked down at his paws. "They say she's doing fine. I'm glad...I guess."

"That's good." She let out a sympathetic sigh. "You miss her, don't you?"

"Well, of course I miss her. She's my best friend," he muttered.

Lisa gave him a gentle flick of her tail. "I'm sure she misses you just as much."

Dash looked up and let out a long sigh. "I hope so. I mean, I guess so."

A full week had passed since Dash had last seen Saderia. Shivering in the cold darkness of night, he tucked his paws under his freezing belly

and tried to keep warm. Trying not to tremble, he let his gaze sweep across the silent clearing in front of him. All around him, animals laid spread out across the ground, huddling together for warmth and shaking in the frigid breeze gliding through the clearing. The hazy scent of sickness clung to the wind and swirled throughout the fortress, curling around him and making him gag with disgust. Frayed blankets had been draped over them, but they did little for warmth.

His head ached with pain when he thought about how long it had been since he had spoken to Saderia. The tiny messages they sent back and forth hardly helped them feel more connected. They couldn't tell each other what was going on through someone else. Curling himself tighter into a ball, Dash tried to ignore his painful thoughts. Even if he managed to ignore his thoughts of Saderia, the gnawing hunger kept him wide awake. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten. The piles of food that had once laid by the sick animals' sides had dwindled. The trees around the fortress were almost completely bare and Karenisha and Makero hadn't given them any food from outside.

Pushing away the pangs of hunger, he stared out at the fortress. Grief burned in his chest when he spotted a cougar cub tossing and turning in its sleep next to a jaguar. Near the entrance, a lynx picked listlessly at a rotten piece of food. Huddled by the old warehouse, several animals muttered to each other in hushed voices. Looking away from the miserable animals, he spotted Maeta standing just a few feet away, murmuring to a lioness. Her brown eyes gleamed with determination even though tiredness haunted her steps. After murmuring one final word to the lioness, Maeta looked up to meet his gaze. Picking up her basket of herbs, she padded forward and sat down in front of him.

"Hello, Dash. Is everything all right?" she asked, looking him over.

He shrugged. "I suppose. What are you doing up? Shouldn't you be resting?"

Maeta shook her head. "I've still got a lot of animals to check on. The King and Queen have given me new herbs, as well, and a few animals want to try them."

"Oh." He sighed. "So how is everyone doing? Are they getting better or worse?"

"It varies. Some have given up the fight, some are fighting harder."



Dash shivered. "At least some are recovering. Didn't you send someone home?"

"Yes, but I didn't send them straight home. I determined he had gotten better after checking him three times and told your foster parents to release him, but he won't go home. For now, he's been sent to an empty den with a healer nearby. He has to stay there for a few days to make sure the sickness doesn't return. If it doesn't, he can go home."

Dash nodded and sighed. "That must be nice."

Maeta echoed his sigh. "I'm sure it is. So how are you feeling tonight?"

He shrugged. "The same as usual."

"You have the same symptoms as yesterday, such as the migraine and unsteadiness and no new pain?" When he nodded, she looked thoughtfully down at her basket. "Your condition is pretty stable. You haven't gotten any better nor any worse."

Frustration burned in his chest. "And that's *good* news?"

Maeta steadily met his burning gaze. "It's not bad news."

Dash glanced down at his paws and narrowed his eyes. "If I don't get better, I'll never go home to see Saderia. It's not *fair*."

Maeta narrowed her eyes. "No, it's not. It's not fair that the disease hurts some worse than others. It's not fair that it kills one animal and leaves the other in mild pain. It's not fair that some animals are able to fight it while others are not." She gave Dash a flick of her tail. "Count your blessings, Prince Dash. I'll bring you some herbs tomorrow."

Shame burned through his body and he hung his head with guilt. Maeta gave him a stern glance, then silently padded away without giving him a chance to apologize. Letting out a long sigh, Dash slowly lifted his head and looked around with sorrow burning in his amber eyes. He would have given up anything if it meant he could go home. He would have given even more if it meant everyone else could do the same.

A cold chill swept through the den, sending shivers down Saderia's spine. Pulling the blanket tighter around her shoulders, she stared out into the darkness and tried to ignore the hard edges of the bed digging into her skin. In the blackness around her, all she could think about was Dash. Was it cold in the fortress? Was he freezing the same way she was without

someone to keep him warm? Her stomach growled, reminding her of the measly piece of food she had shared with Cia and Uncle Jash. Was Dash starving too?

Closing her eyes, she silently begged for sleep, if for nothing else than to escape the pain. Maybe if she fell asleep, she would wake up to realize this had all been nothing but a nightmare. Maybe if she fell asleep, it would wash away the sadness and worry dragging her down. Maybe if she fell asleep, it would make her old powers turn real again and *help* her. Maybe it would somehow show her how he was doing. Maybe she could believe in her extra senses again if they helped her just this once. Squeezing her eyes shut tighter, she silently hoped that somehow *something* would help her. A memory of Dash's warm face flashed in her mind seconds before she drifted into unconsciousness.

A shadowed figure darted through a murky haze of barely distinguishable trees and bushes. The wild green and blue eyes of the dark creature flashed in the silvery light of the moon as it raced through the dark forest. Ducking behind a clump of undergrowth, the figure disappeared out of sight. A shriek of fear echoed through the hazy forest before the moon slithered behind a cloud and plunged the woods into pure darkness.

Through the darkness, Saderia heard a loud, determined roar and felt her eyes widen in recognition. Hope stirred in her chest as her father's roar faded into silence, but the hope disappeared when a freezing wind sliced through the blackness and cleared her vision. Shock and horror replaced the feeling when she found herself staring at her den. Huddled in the back was a gaunt, dirty tiger wearing a broken crown. The weak tiger slowly looked up at her and met her gaze with lifeless amber eyes that stared straight through her. Her eyes slipped shut and the vision was swept away like wind ripping through a dune of sand.

...*Accept what happened...* A soft, faint voice whispered in her ears, echoing around her in the darkness. Light brown eyes flashed in front of her and a light brown dingo shone through the blackness. Her eyes met Saderia's a second before she faded back into the darkness around her. The light that shone from her fur pierced through the blackness, then vanished into the stony walls of a towering den. Laying weakly on the rocky bed across from her was a dark brown figure. His chest heaved with shaky

breaths and his eyes squeezed shut in pain. His body shuddered and started fading into the darkness creeping in on him. Claw's soft voice whispered in her ear. "*She's special!*"

A second later, the blackness crashed over the scene and dragged both of them down into an endless void of darkness.

Saderia awoke with a sharp gasp and looked around wildly, her heart pounding frantically in her chest. Sitting up on her bed, she scanned her room. Her heart gradually began to slow down as light flashed from outside and pushed away her cold fear.

Sitting back with a shaky sigh, she gritted her teeth in rage when she thought back to the Dream. A furious hiss escaped her throat. The Dream had told her nothing about Dash. Just once she had asked her sense to help her...and it had failed. She shoved her blanket away with an infuriated snarl. "A lot of help that was!" Scenes of the Dream raced through her mind, making her heart ache with pain. Pushing the pain away, she thought about the last words she had heard in her dream and let out a humorless chuckle. Special? How could she be special when her extra senses never helped her? Fury burned in her chest when she remembered seeing Claw in the dream. It hadn't been the real her. All she had been was a memory. Claw had long abandoned her just like Dingo and Dash.

Feeling pain and rage searing her heart, she grabbed the blanket and hurled it away from her. "I hate this!" she hissed. "I hate these dreams! I hate this forest! I hate this life!" Her amber eyes flamed with rage. "And you too, Claw! You hear that?! I hate you! And tell Dingo if you see him that I hate him too!" She shook her head fiercely as tears swam before her eyes. "Stupid, worthless dreams! They never help!" She slumped back onto her stony bed and buried her face in her paws. "Dash, when are you coming home?"

"Karenisha? Makero?" Dash pressed close to the huge boulder. "Are you there?"

Karenisha's voice drifted over to him. "Dash? We're here. What do you need?"

A low, ravenous growl rumbled in Dash's stomach, but he tried to ignore it. "Nothing, really. I was just wondering if you had had a chance to

talk to Saderia.”

“We talked to her last night and she says she’s fine.”

Dash sighed. “Right.”

Karenisha let out a sigh. “I know you miss her, Dash. But hopefully you’ll get better soon. Whenever we talk to Maeta, she seems confident that you’ll recover soon.”

“I hope so,” Dash muttered, trying to hide the disbelief in his dark tone. Glancing around at the fortress, he tried not to wince. The sun shimmered warmly in the sky, but most of the animals laid shivering on the ground. Their ribs jutted out through their thin fur and dark bags hung under their eyes. When some tried to stand, they stumbled back down out of weakness. Not a single piece of fruit grew on the dying trees scattered around the clearing. Dead leaves covered the ground around the bare skeletons of the trees.

Dash’s stomach growled with hunger. “Guys? I don’t know if Maeta’s told you, but we’re running out of food. Could you bring us some from outside the fortress?”

A long, cold silence followed his plea.

“Dash...” Karenisha took a deep breath. “Dash...I’m afraid we can’t do that.”

He blinked in surprise and felt a chill shiver down his spine. “What? Why not?”

“Dash, it’s just not possible right now.”

He gaped in disbelief. “What? You guys don’t understand. The trees are bare. The animals are starting to *starve*. Why can’t you bring us some food?”

Another deafening silence spread out in the thick air between them. After what felt like ages, Makero reluctantly took a deep breath and let it out in a heavy sigh. “Dash...There is no food left.”

Dash blinked in shock. “Wh-What? What do you mean there’s no food left?”

Makero took another deep breath. “I mean that there’s only a few tiny pieces of fruit left on the trees. Karenisha and I haven’t eaten in three days and Cia, Jash, and Saderia barely get one meal a day. Sometimes they can’t find anything to eat.”

Dash gaped in horror. “Wait...so the forest...is starving?”

“Starvation has already taken its toll on some animals,” he muttered. “Animals are fighting over food. Some days there’s a bit more on the trees, some days a bit less, but that’s only going to last so long. Soon there will be no food at all.”

He gasped. “But...what will we do then?”

“There’s not much we can do. We’re the only living things here, so we can’t hunt. We might consider eating other things like leaves if we must, but in this forest, it’s impossible to know what’s poisonous and what’s not. We can’t drink the river water, but we could live off of rainwater...but then if there’s a drought, we’re finished.”

“What...what are you going to do?” he stammered. “We’re out of food, too. If we don’t die of sickness, we’ll die of starvation. We need to keep up our strength.”

Makero fell silent for a long moment. After what felt like an eternity, he finally muttered, “I have an idea, but it’s risky. Still...I have to try it.” He took a slow, deep breath. “Dash, as soon as you’re well enough to come home, I will leave the forest.”

Dash’s eyes widened. “What?! You’re leaving?!” He opened his mouth to protest, then froze in shock at a stunning realization. “Are you going to try to find a new home?!”

Makero chuckled. “No, not a new home. An old one.”

“It’s official. You no longer have the disease.”

Dash looked up as Maeta spoke and followed her gaze to stare at the small leopard in front of her. Lisa’s eyes widened. “Do you mean it? I can really go home?”

“You’ll have to spend a few days in another empty den to make sure the illness does not return, but I highly doubt it will. After that, yes, you will be able to go home. You’ll have to take Tawny with you when you leave. I’ve arranged for Loki to meet you at the empty den. She’ll pick up Tawny and bring her back to the Home of the Leopards, then return for you in a few days.” Her gaze drifted down to the ground where Tawny stood at her feet, her brown eyes shining and her tail flicking energetically back and forth.

A bright, grateful smile spread across Lisa’s face as she gazed up at Maeta. Watching her closely, Dash couldn’t help but feel a twinge of

jealousy. For the past few days, Maeta had been carefully checking Lisa and he had heard her mutter that she had almost recovered just two days ago. Any animal could tell she was better just by looking at her. While her ribs still stuck out of her sides, her fur was cleaner and more vibrant, and her gray blue eyes had regained their bright sparkle. Sheltered from the others in Maeta's herb basket, Tawny had also shaken off the sickness. Her energy had returned even though she looked gaunt and bony from hunger and she had a hard time keeping still in Maeta's basket. Before the sun had risen that morning, Dash had spied Maeta murmuring to Karenisha and Makero through the rock about sending them home.

Suppressing a sigh, he tried to smile at Lisa. "Congratulations, Lisa! It's great that you feel better now. I'm sure Loki will be happy to see you."

Lisa beamed at him and nodded enthusiastically, unable to suppress the glow spreading across her face. "Thank you, Dash! I...I wish you could have recovered too..."

Dash forced himself to smile a weak smile and nod.

She smiled shyly and flicked her tail. "You are feeling better, right?"

He nodded, trying to ignore the pain burning through his limbs. "Yeah, I feel fine, and I guess I'm a little better. You'll have to ask Maeta, though. She's the expert."

Maeta gave them a slight smile when they turned to look at her, but the weak grin didn't match her dark eyes. "Dash is...fine. He's doing a bit better."

Lisa let out a relieved sigh. "That's great news! Maybe you'll come home soon."

Dash tried to return the smile. "Yeah, maybe."

Lisa nodded and gave him a gentle flick of her tail. "Well...I guess this is goodbye for now, Dash. I...I guess I'll see you soon enough. I hope you get better soon."

He sighed and smiled a weak smile. "Goodbye, Lisa. Maybe I will see you soon."

Lisa nodded and stared at him with bright, sympathetic eyes before tearing her gaze off him. Turning around, she flicked her tail in indication for Tawny to follow and padded toward the boulder. "Tawny, say goodbye to Dash," she called.

Whirling around, Tawny gave him an exuberant wave. “Bye-bye, Dash!”

Dash forced a smile and waved back. Turning around, the cub eagerly bounded after Lisa and disappeared with them behind a crowd of leopards. A loud, groaning sound filled the air a moment later when they stopped in front of the huge boulder blocking the entrance and waited patiently for Karenisha and Makero to push it aside to let them out.

Heaving a sigh, Dash turned to see Maeta studying him closely. She met his gaze with dark, knowing eyes. “Now that Lisa’s gone, Dash, how do you really feel?”

He looked down in embarrassment. “Worse, actually. I kind of lied to Lisa.”

Maeta let out a long sigh. “Well, that makes two of us. I lied when I told her how you were doing. You’re not getting better. You’re getting worse.”

He blinked and stared at her in shock. “What? I’m actually getting worse?”

“Yes, you are, and you’re going to keep getting worse if you don’t relax. I can tell you’re stressing about something. I don’t know what’s going on with the royal family, but if you want to help them, you have to stop stressing about things so you can get better.”

Dash bit his lip and looked away, feeling his heart skip at hearing his own worries voiced to him. Stress had haunted him ever since he had heard about Makero’s plan to leave the forest. Whenever he walked around to stretch his muscles, he wondered if he should save his strength. Every time Maeta handed him an herb, he hoped it would somehow be the cure. Any time he spotted another sick animal eating a piece of food, he felt a surge of jealousy and feared he was missing his chance to recover his strength

Shaking his head, he faced Maeta with pleading eyes. “I’m sorry, but you don’t understand. Makero needs me back home before he can do something to help the forest. I’ll do anything to get better. I’ll take any herb. I don’t care what the side effects are.”

She heaved a long sigh. “Dash, I have not found a cure and the herbs I have now have no guarantee that they will work or that they won’t

poison you. I have to inspect them carefully before I try them on anyone, much less the Prince of the forest.”

“But, Maeta, I have to get better! Isn’t there anything I can do?”

“Yes, you can try to relax.” She gave him a stern look. “I’m sorry, Dash, but that’s all I can tell you. If King Makero is willing to wait, then you should be, too.”

He hung his head and squeezed his eyes shut. “Maeta, please.”

“There’s nothing I can do.” Her stern gaze softened. “You’re a strong animal, Dash, and I know you can fight this, but not if you let it get the best of you. I’ve got a few animals to check on today, but I’ll be back to you later and we can try a few more herbs. Until then, take care of yourself.” She turned to walk away, then stopped and looked back. “Oh, and Dash?” When he looked up, she let out a soft sigh. “I’m sorry.”

Silver moonlight shimmered through the woods, casting a luminous light across Saderia’s fur. Her eyes glowed in the dim light as she gazed dully out at the woods, her eyelids drooping with exhaustion. Memories of the Dream she had had days ago danced through her mind, making her wince with sadness and guilt. She tried to push away her feelings of grief when she remembered how she had yelled at Claw and Dingo.

Closing her eyes, she tried to imagine seeing Dash. None of the messages he sent to her through Karenisha and Makero reassured her when she knew he could be lying. All she could do was hope he was getting better. When she tried to imagine Dash, she pictured him bounding out of the woods to meet her, his eyes bright. Opening her eyes, she blinked the vision away and gazed out at the dark woods. If she looked closely, she could almost see him hiding behind the undergrowth, waiting to come back to her.

“It seems you have fought the disease.”

Dash slowly looked up from his paws to see Maeta watching him closely, her eyes clouded and deep in thought. He stared at her in disbelief and felt his heart skip as her words dawned on him. “What? You...you mean I’m healthy? I can go home?”

Maeta narrowed her eyes and looked him over. After a long moment, she met his stunned gaze. “Do you feel tired? Do you feel any of



the other symptoms?”

His heart beat faster. “No, I’ve been feeling much better now that I think of it.” He looked up at her with wide eyes. Days had passed since Lisa had left and he had almost stopped believing he would get better. “Maeta...” he whispered. “Can I go home?”

Maeta let out a long sigh. “Dash, I have to tell you that the disease could easily come back for you since it never really got bad. I would wait a while, but...”

“But I have to go back!” He stared at her with eyes wide with desperation. “I have to get home so Makero can carry out his plans! Please, Maeta! *Please* let me go home.”

Maeta hesitated for a long moment before finally giving him a slight nod. “All right. It’s a bit against my practice, but I will let you go straight home without having to wait at the empty den, so the royal family can put their plans in motion. Just be sure to take good care of yourself and tell me if you feel the least bit feverish. I’m warning you now that this might not be the end of the sickness. It could be just a short break in between.”

“I’ll take my chances,” he insisted, barely hearing her words.

“Very well.” Maeta studied him for an infuriatingly long moment before finally turning around and flicking her tail to signal for him to follow.

Dash’s heart beat wildly in his chest as he fell into step behind her and padded toward the entrance of the fortress. The weeks that had passed had felt like eternities without Saderia. Ever since Lisa had left, he had barely even tried to get better. Any chance of recovery had seemed so unlikely. After all those days of hoping and despairing, was he finally about to go home? Was he truly just moments away from seeing Saderia again?

“Queen Karenisha! King Makero!” Maeta stopped in front of the boulder blocking the exit and leaned closer. “Your adopted son seems to have recovered and he says he has not felt any discomfort. I think it’s safe for him to leave the fortress and return home.”

Stepping back, Maeta stood beside Dash and watched as the boulder began to tremble. A low groaning noise filled the air and the ground shook violently under their paws. Dash’s heart beat faster and faster and his eyes remained locked on the boulder as a tiny crack appeared between the rock and the fortress wall. Sunlight streamed in through the crack and glinted

brightly in the sky until the boulder finally stopped and the rumbling groan died away. Dash stared out at the woods waiting outside the fortress in awe and blinked when two tigers poked their heads around the side of the fortress wall.

Bright smiles spread across Karenisha and Makero's faces. "That's great news!" Karenisha exclaimed. "Are you sure he's completely cured?"

Maeta glanced at Dash for a long moment. "I'll tell you what I told him. He shows no signs of the disease, but he needs to take care of himself or the disease could return."

Their amber and green eyes lit up. "We will." Makero dipped his head. When he looked up, he beamed. "Come on, Dash. Let's get home. We have a lot to discuss."

Dash stared in awe, almost unable to believe what was happening. Muttering a hasty goodbye to Maeta, he stumbled out of the fortress behind Karenisha and Makero. A gust of fresh air washed over him the instant he set foot outside the terrifying wall. The colorful woods around the fortress rose up around him, welcoming him. No walls blocked him. Beyond the bright woods, the forest stretched out for hundreds of miles where he could be free. Beyond the woods, Saderia was waiting for him.

His heart skipped with hope. Before anyone could stop him, he lunged into the woods with Karenisha and Makero running far behind him. Their cries of surprise faded away as he raced through the forest. His paws slammed against the grassy ground, snapping twigs and crushing leaves. Ducking underneath low branches covered with purple leaves and dodging around baby blue bushes, he let his paws carry him back to his home. He barely noticed the trees leaning down to snag his fur, the leaves floating around him, or the weeds tugging at his paws. All that mattered was getting back to Saderia.

The woods gave way to a grassy clearing spreading out in front of him. Just as the rocky top of his den rose up into sight, a loud shriek echoed through the woods.

***"Dash!"***

Dash skidded to a halt just in time to see an orange and black blur lunge toward him. The breath left his throat as he stumbled backward and collapsed on the warm, grassy ground in a heap of fur. Looking up, he

smiled a wide smile when he saw Saderia look up beside him. A bright, excited grin lit up her bright amber eyes.

“Dash!” she gasped. “You’re back! I thought I would never see you again!”

His eyes shone with happiness. “I thought so, too. I’m so happy to be home!”

Tears glimmered in Saderia’s eyes. “I missed you so much! The nights were so cold and I was so miserable and everything was just so horrible!”

He blinked in shock. “I thought you were doing okay.”

She hung her head. “I’m sorry, Dash. I just pretended to be so that you wouldn’t worry about me and you wouldn’t be afraid to tell me if something was wrong.”

He gave her a sad smile. “I guess we both tried to look after each other.” He smiled. “I told you I would be fine. It wasn’t bad. Missing you was the worst part.”

Saderia smiled weakly. “I missed you, too. I was scared I’d never see you again.”

Dash smiled a reassuring smile and carefully pulled himself to his paws before leaning down to help her up. Looking up, he met her watery gaze and felt his heart beat faster with joy and relief. “I was scared too,” he whispered. “But I’m here now.”

Saderia grinned and tried to blink back tears. “I’m so glad!”

“Dash?” The two of them looked up at the entrance to the den at the sound of the soft, stunned voice. Cia and Uncle Jash stood outlined by the gaping entrance of the den, staring at Dash in shock and amazement.

Cia blinked in incredulity. “You’re home!”

Uncle Jash gaped in surprise, then smiled a warm smile. “Welcome back.”

Dash smiled and nodded gratefully, then pricked his ears at the sound of a soft, rustling noise coming from the woods. Turning around, he looked up to see Karenisha and Makero leap out from behind the bushes, panting heavily and covered in leaves.

Catching his gaze, the Queen narrowed her eyes. “We thought we had lost you!”

Dash shrugged sheepishly. “Sorry. I just really wanted to get home.”

Karenisha waved his apologies away. "It's all right, Dash. But now that you're here, there's something we need to discuss with you and Saderia."

Looking up in surprise, Saderia stood protectively between Dash and her mother. Feeling a twinge of fear, she pressed closer to Dash, terrified of losing him again.

Karenisha smiled half-heartedly. "Don't worry, Saderia. Dash isn't going anywhere. He's going to stay here with you."

Relief swept over her, but she didn't dare step away from Dash's side.

Karenisha and Makero exchanged an uneasy glance. "Saderia," Makero began. "This forest...is too difficult. We are running out of food and hope. Karenisha and I have decided to see if the hunters have left our old home. Since we left, there's a good chance they have run out of live game to hunt. There's no harm in trying."

Saderia blinked in shock and felt her heart beat faster. "But...there is harm..."

"Our choice is final," he interrupted. "We've decided that I will travel back to the old forest alone to see if the hunters have gone."

# Chapter Eighteen

## Last-Ditch Effort

Saderia stared at him in shock. A thousand horrifying scenes flashed through her mind: dingoes racing after Makero with vicious howls; snakes hissing coldly as he hurtled down into a dark pit; floods crashing down on him and dragging him into a swirl of muddy water; sandstorms burying him in a torrent of stinging sand; hunters taking aim at him from behind a tree... A thousand dangers seemed to surround the land waiting just outside their new home. "Dad," she stammered. "You...you can't. It's dangerous."

Makero placed his tail gently on her shoulder. "I know it's dangerous, but the way to our old forest is just straight through the desert. I've made it before."

She stared at him in disbelief. "Back then you weren't alone!"

"Which means that now I should be able to travel faster. If I only have myself to look after, I won't have to worry about others."

"But..." Saderia looked up to see Dash step forward and stare at the King in disbelief. "When you told me...I thought you were taking at least one more animal."

Saderia blinked in surprise. "He told you?"

"He hinted at it back at the fortress," Dash murmuring absently. Looking back at the King, he narrowed his eyes. "Makero, I don't think it's safe to go alone. I mean, what about the dingoes? Or the hunters lurking in the forest? They could still be there."

Makero sighed. "I'm aware of the danger, Dash. Karenisha and I have gone over this before. But I've decided that if I'm alone, I can get it done a lot quicker than if I take someone else, and with only me on this trip, I can also hide easier in the desert and the forest. Besides, you two got lost in the desert for weeks and you survived just fine."

"But..." Dash glanced at Saderia and broke off nervously.

Saderia narrowed her eyes. "But we had Dingo." Glancing at Dash, she murmured, "It's no secret he's dead. We need to stop skirting around his

name and remember what he did for us, not how he left us.” Turning back to Makero, she took a deep breath. “Dingo’s the only reason we survived. Without him, we would be dead.”

Makero let out a soft sigh. “I know how much he helped you, but I still believe I can do it. I know what to look out for.” He paused. “I think it will take me at least a week or so to get to the old forest, check it out, and come back. However, if there are no hunters around, I’ll explore the forest more thoroughly, so it might take up to two weeks.”

“But...”

“No buts,” he said, cutting her off. “This is something I have to do for the forest.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “But Dad...!”

“Saderia.” Karenisha cut her off and met her burning gaze. “If you thought it was a good idea to go back to the old forest...if you thought that there was the slightest chance we could have our home back...would you go? Would you tough it out and travel through the desert to do it? Would you even like traveling through the desert?” She took a deep breath. “All of us will be worried about your father. But it’s what he has to do.”

Saderia gritted her teeth. “Why does he have to go alone?”

She sighed. “I’ve argued that with him myself and he isn’t changing his mind.”

“The forest needs their Queen,” Makero spoke up, glancing at Karenisha with a kind gaze. “Karenisha can’t come because she has to take care of the forest. She also needs someone to help her, which is why Cia and Jash can’t come. I can’t impose on any of the forest animals to come with me and I can’t take you and Dash with me either.”

Her fur bristled. “Why?”

“Because you already got lost and I’m not risking it again. It’s too dangerous.”

Saderia flattened her ears. “Too dangerous? Really? I’ve fought Dastarius, Lolista, and a bloodthirsty pack of dingoes! I’ve had a bunch of crazed mutts run me into chasms filled with snakes bent on eating me alive! What’s one more trip through the desert?”

Makero let out a sigh and tried to hide a grin. “I’m sorry, Saderia, but you can’t come. Think of it this way: Dash just got over being sick, so

he should rest. You wouldn't want to bring him on a big trip and I know you wouldn't go without each other."

Dash opened his mouth to say he was fine, then froze when he caught the dangerous look Makero flashed him. Closing his mouth, he glanced at Saderia and gave her a sheepish shrug. "Sorry, Saderia. Maybe he's right."

She bit her lip and looked away, her mind whirling with worry. The desert was nothing but danger and her old home was less a home than a deathtrap if the hunters were still there. Yet even with all the threats that might be waiting for her, she would have given almost everything to make the journey. Without Dash by her side, though, she was doomed. The only one who could go *was* Makero. Everyone else had to stay behind for reasons too important to jeopardize. Heaving a long sigh, she looked down at her paws and tried to calm the fear in her heart. "All right, Dad, but *please* be careful. I love you."

Makero gave her a warm smile. "I love you too. I'll be careful. And don't forget that I managed to survive going through the desert to look for you two without any help."

She managed a weak smile. "Maybe you're right. I guess it won't be too hard since you've already done it. But...if you see something white, get as far away from it as possible. It's a pile of bones marking the entrance to a dingo camp and if it's not abandoned, you're dead. And if you hear howls, run. You can't fight them. There are way too many. If it gets cloudy or starts to rain, find Dingo's old den or an abandoned one and hide out until the flood is over. If you run out of food, cactuses have some weird juice in them. Oh, and be *really* careful to not run into the Snake Pit. That's another thing you have to look out for. If you see a huge gaping hole, run as far away as possible. And..."

"Okay, okay." Makero tried to hide a grin. "I think I've got enough information."

She flattened her ears. "But there's so much to look out for. And what about when you get back to the old forest? What about the hunters?"

Makero met her worried gaze. "Saderia, I refuse to die recklessly in my own home. I know that forest inside and out. I know every single bush and tree. I know exactly how to place my paws so that they don't make a sound on that land and I know how to hide in the bushes without making

them rustle. Those hunters might have driven us out, but that forest will never be theirs. I'm not afraid of them. I won't die on my own land."

She took a deep breath. "I know you'll be careful, but I don't want to lose you."

He patted her gently with his tail. "It's all right, Saderia. Don't be sad. If I'm right, we might just get our old forest back."

Saderia let out a shaky sigh and nodded, trying to ignore a cold sense of fear.

"I leave tomorrow," he went on, watching her closely. "Don't lose sleep over it."

"He'll be taking most of the food," Karenisha murmured, casting a warning look at Cia and Uncle Jash when they winced and exchanged uneasy glances. "It's for the best. We'll still have food and we can scrounge around for more. If worse comes to worse, we still have friends that we can ask for food. We'll find some way to repay them."

Makero looked down with a guilty sigh. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience. But I'm really confident about this and Karenisha has a good feeling about it too."

The Queen looked away, her eyes suddenly distant. "Yeah. A...a good feeling..."

Saderia frowned and started to ask what was wrong with Karenisha, then paused when Makero pressed his paw warmly against her shoulder. "It's already getting late. You two should get some sleep. In the meantime, I'm going to get some rest myself. I won't leave until you're all awake to say goodbye, so you won't have to worry about that."

Saderia let out a long, shaky sigh. "All right, Dad. Get a really good night's sleep so you can be awake. It's...it's really hard out there in the desert and with the hunters..." She broke off and shivered. "I don't want to lose you. Especially not like that."

"I know. I'll be careful. I promise." He nuzzled her gently. "Goodnight, Saderia."

Saderia smiled weakly back and reluctantly turned to face the den. Pressing close to Dash and feeling a tingle of relief, she padded into the den. Ducking into her room, she leapt up onto the rough bed and smiled when Dash climbed up beside her.



He grinned when she pulled the thin blankets over them. "It's good to be back. And I'm sure your Dad will be fine. Makero's tough. He knows what he's doing."

She sighed. "I hope so. But how dangerous is the desert now? I mean, Bone is dead. Dingo killed him...And wasn't he like their King or something? Well, actually, from what Dingo said, he was more like a Prince, so there's still someone in charge, but still...Do you think with Bone dead the pack will be less dangerous?"

Dash frowned. "I don't know. All the dingoes followed his orders, but they all seemed as cruel as him. They're probably still dangerous even without their Prince. Or Second in Command, as Dingo called it. Either way, Makero should watch his back."

"You're definitely right about that." Suppressing a sigh, she laid down and pressed against Dash's soft brown fur. A slight smile spread across her face when she rested her head against the bed and closed her eyes. For a moment, she felt a warm glow of peace. Snuggling closer to Dash, all she could do was hope the feeling would last.

"Hey!" Jeb scrambled toward the edge of the basin in surprise. His eyes widened in shock when he realized the towering pile of fruit had shrunk overnight. "How...?" He looked around at the Spring and spotted outlaws sitting along the walls. Anxiousness glimmered in their eyes. All of them cast nervous glances toward the hole in the ceiling from time to time, as if searching for someone. Jeb blinked at them in shock. Could it be?

"Yes, there is less food."

Jeb jumped and whirled around to see his father padding toward him.

Telku gave him an apologetic look as he stepped forward to sit beside him. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. But as you can see, there is definitely less food."

Jeb blinked in surprise. "Is Secka stealing less?"

"No, he's stealing more." Telku smiled. "The others are just helping more."

Jeb blinked in shock. "The others have been trying to return the food like us?"

“Yes, I’ve seen some doing it,” Telku replied with a happy look around at the outlaws. “A lot of them are still against it and a lot of them are terrified of what the creatures or Secka will do to them if they get caught, but a few have at least tried to help. Hopefully the creatures will get the food before Secka has a chance to take it again.”

Jeb blinked in wonder. “That’s good...” A glimmer of hope lit up his heart at the thought of the others finally helping out. He felt a slight smile spread across his face, but before he could speak to his father, a sudden growl echoed through the Spring.

Whirling around, he scanned the darkness with wide, terrified eyes, searching for any sign of flashing gray eyes. The cave around him held no sign of Secka. Letting out a sigh, he turned and tried to relax. Ever since Secka had warned him to stay away from Zerone, he had constantly looked over both shoulders, terrified that the outlaw would be waiting for him. Somehow he doubted Secka would be satisfied with his promise to keep quiet. If he was willing to kill Zerone, he was willing to kill him, too.

Jeb hadn’t dared to warn Zerone, but in the days that had passed, he had been riddled with guilt. Every time Secka left, he couldn’t help but wonder if he was going to kill Zerone. Every time he returned, he couldn’t help but wonder if the Emperor was dead. If Secka killed Zerone, he would probably be all too happy to announce it, so Jeb spent his days waiting for news he was scared to receive. Zerone might be cruel, but he didn’t deserve to die. And if Zerone died, what would happen to Keruni? She had already lost her mother when she was born. What would happen to her if she lost her father, too?

His paws itched with the longing to stop Secka, but he knew he couldn’t go to Zerone. If the Emperor didn’t kill him on sight, Secka would when he got back. There was nothing he could do. Secka’s plan had played out just the way he wanted.

“Goodbye, Saderia.” Makero stood facing his family with a warm smile. The vast desert sand stretched out behind him as far as the eye could see. Heat seemed to rise off of the ground in waves as the sun beat down on the open, gritty land. A pack stuffed with food hung over the King’s shoulder, nearly bursting at the seams. A rare abundance of food had appeared on the trees overnight and though it seemed unnerving how

quickly the fruit had come back, they had crammed most of it into Makero's pack and left the rest on the trees for later. Facing his family and smiling warmly, Makero turned to his daughter and flicked her with his tail. "Be good for your mother and aunt and uncle."

Saderia nodded weakly. "I love you Dad. Please, *please* be careful."

"I will. I'll try to be back as soon as I can," he promised. "I'll be gone two weeks at most. I love you, too." Giving her a kind smile, he slowly turned to face Dash. "You're a good kid, Dash. Take good care of Saderia."

Dash managed a weak smile. "I will, Makero. I promise."

Makero smiled at him and nodded before giving him a soft pat on the shoulder and padding away to stand in front of Cia and Uncle Jash. He nodded to them and managed a smile. "I'll miss you two. Take care of my family. They need you."

They nodded and smiled tight smiles. "We'll try," Cia whispered.

"Be safe," Uncle Jash echoed, dipping his head and trying to smile.

Makero nodded, then took a deep breath and slowly let it out. Turning around, he gently pressed against Karenisha and tried to smile. "I know you'll be able to take care of the kingdom while I'm gone. Take care. I'll be back as soon as I can. I love you."

Karenisha let out a sigh and looked away. "I love you too," she murmured. "Makero, please don't do anything rash and watch out. Always be cautious and safe."

"I will." He flicked her gently with his tail and smiled. Pulling back, he padded back toward the desert and stopped when he caught his daughter's worried gaze. "I'm going to be fine, Saderia. I know you can be strong. I'll be back as soon as possible."

She nodded meekly and let out a sigh. "Goodbye, Dad. I...I know you have to go, but if the hunters are still there, that's okay. Maybe once we accept that we can never go home...that our old home isn't home anymore...then we can get over it and start again."

Makero blinked and smiled. "If the hunters are there, I hope you're right. Your Mom's going to announce I've left later on. Maybe the kingdom will see it that way too."

She nodded tensely and met his kind gaze. "I hope so. Goodbye, Dad."

He smiled. "Goodbye, Saderia. Goodbye, Karenisha, Dash, Cia, Jash." He nodded to each member of the family as he said their names, then took a deep breath. Casting one last glance at his family, he turned to face the desert. After a brief hesitation, he tugged his pack around his shoulder and took a step forward. Saderia watched him with watery eyes as he walked farther and farther away from them until he finally disappeared behind a sand dune. His paw steps in the sand ended in the spot where he had vanished from sight.

Saderia let out a shaky sigh. "Please come back," she whispered. "Soon."

Sunlight streamed into the den, casting a soft yellow glow across Saderia's fur. Blinking open her eyes, she let out a long yawn and looked around. A slight smile spread across her face when she glanced back to see Dash sleeping behind her, but it faded when she realized she wouldn't see her father that morning. Trying to ignore a twinge of unease, she looked down at Dash. The dark lion twisted and turned on the bed, his eyes squeezed shut and his paws grasping at the stone beneath them. His breath wheezed out in short, quick pants. Frowning, she gave him a gentle nudge. "Hey, wake up! It's morning."

His eyes flew open and he jerked upward, looking around wildly and gasping for air. Whirling around, he froze when he saw Saderia and blinked in surprise. "Saderia?"

She nodded and tried to smile. "Good morning. Are...are you okay?"

Dash took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "Yeah, I guess so. I...I just had a nightmare or something." He shook himself when a shiver raced up his spine and turned back to give her a weak smile. "Sorry if I disturbed you. I hope I didn't wake you up."

She flicked him gently with her tail. "It's fine. I slept like a log last night."

"That's good." He smiled at her and turned to look out into the den. He started to say something, then broke off and winced. Glancing away from her, he pressed his paw to his forehead and rubbed it absently. A twinge of pain shone in his narrowed eyes.

Saderia frowned. "Is everything okay?"

“Huh? Oh. Yeah, fine.” He glanced over at her and tried to smile, but his weak grin couldn’t match his clouded eyes. “It just feels like I have a headache.”

“Is it bad?”

Gritting his teeth, he shook his head. “It’s fine.” Letting out a long sigh, he glanced toward the entrance. “Come on. Let’s go see if Cia and Jash are up.”

She watched him closely for a long moment before finally nodding. “All right. Let’s go.” Pushing herself to her paws, she leapt down from the bed and padded toward the entrance. Behind her, Dash jumped down with a soft thud and stumbled forward. Catching himself, he hurried after Saderia and followed her into the main part of the den.

Sitting around the stone that served as a table were Cia and Uncle Jash. At the sound of their paw steps, Saderia’s aunt and uncle looked up and smiled warmly.

“Good morning,” Cia called. “Did you two sleep well?”

“Yeah, we slept fine,” Saderia replied, padding forward to sit down around the table by Uncle Jash. Her heart ached when she looked up to see no sign of Makero. Fear stirred in her chest when she wondered how he was doing and what he had already faced. Pushing the thoughts away, she frowned when she realized who else was missing.

“Where’s Mom?” she asked, glancing around at her family.

“Karenisha left earlier this morning to go keep watch around the fortress,” Cia explained. “She’s also going to hold a meeting today to announce Makero’s leaving.”

“Oh.” Saderia’s ears drooped. “How are the sick animals doing?”

“Pretty good actually,” Uncle Jash replied. “A lot more are being sent home recently. Maeta’s recovered from the sickness she had, as well, but she’s stayed behind to help the others. They all seem to be doing fine.”

Saderia blinked in surprise then grinned. “That’s great!”

“It is,” Cia agreed with a sigh. “Maybe we’re finally starting to beat this thing.”

“That is good news,” Dash murmured, taking a bite of his food and curling his lip at the taste.

Saderia nodded thoughtfully. “How do you guys think Dad is doing?”

Cia shrugged. "I'm sure he's fine."

"Yeah, he seemed to have planned it pretty well," Uncle Jash added.

Saderia sighed. "I hope you're right."

"I wouldn't worry about it too much." Cia shrugged and faced Saderia. "Could you and Dash do us a favor and collect some fruit? I want to keep some in the house."

She nodded. "Sure, Cia."

Biting off the last few bits of fruit, Saderia pushed herself to her paws and gestured for Dash to follow her. Setting his food back on the table, Dash reluctantly stumbled to his paws and held on to the table to keep his balance. Turning toward the entrance, Saderia led the way outside with Dash trailing close beside her. A cool breeze whisked past them when their paws brushed the hard grass outside, making Saderia smile. Behind her, Dash shivered and fluffed out his fur, trying not to wince at the chill.

She glanced back at him and frowned. "Are you cold?"

"A little," he muttered, trying to shake off a shiver. "Aren't you?"

"Not really. It's pretty nice out here today." Her eyes narrowed and a small shiver of unease crept down her spine. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." He stepped forward to stand beside her, giving her a weak smile. "Come on, let's find something to bring back to Cia and Jash. I think I saw a ton of food in that tree." He gestured to the small, leafy tree growing close to their den.

Following his gaze, Saderia nodded and bounded toward it with Dash close beside her. At the bottom of the tree, she stopped to look up and frowned when she saw only branches covered in greenish blue leaves. On the morning before Makero left, tiny pieces of fruit had stuck out through the leaves and filled the upper branches of the tree. Glancing over at Saderia, Dash took a deep breath and carefully bunched his muscles. He hesitated for a long moment, then leapt toward one of the closest branches. His paws slammed onto the tough bark and he slipped downward. Clawing frantically at the branch, he unsteadily pulled himself up and heaved a long, shaky sigh.

"Are you okay?" Saderia called.

"Fine," Dash called back. "I just couldn't get a hold on the branch." Taking a deep breath, he looked around. "I'll see what I can find and throw it down to you."

Saderia simply nodded and sat back to wait. Dash climbed uncomfortably onto the next branch and disappeared behind a flurry of leaves. The leaves rustled around him and Saderia could see flashes of his dark brown paws moving across the thick branches. Crawling from branch to branch, he searched for any sign of fruit, but the tree was eerily bare. After several minutes had passed, he finally poked his head out through the leaves and stared down at Saderia.

“Find anything?” she called, her eyes lighting up eagerly.

He frowned and shook his head. “No. There’s no food up here.”

She blinked at him in shock. “What? But there was so much the day Dad left!”

“I know, but now there’s none at all. The tree’s completely empty of any fruit.”

A cold, nervous shiver traveled down her spine. “There’s nothing at all?”

Dash frowned. “No, not a single piece of food. There’s no sign it was ever here.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “But it was! We saw it!”

“I know.” He frowned in confusion. “We could check the other trees if you want.”

Saderia glanced around at the other trees. Peering through the branches, she could see no hint of the bright fruit she had seen before. She shook her head in disbelief. “What’s going on? There was so much food the day Dad left. How can it all be...gone?”

Dash scanned the trees. His eyes grew darker when he realized they were bare. “I don’t know. Something really weird is going on. Why was there so much food yesterday anyway? It all seemed to appear out of nowhere...and now today it’s disappeared again.”

A shiver crept down Saderia’s spine. “Maybe it will come back tomorrow.”

Dash looked away, his eyes narrowed in disbelief. “Maybe.”

She sighed, trying to ignore a cold chill. “I hope we can find some later.”

Taking a deep breath, Dash leapt down from the branch and staggered on the ground. Lunging forward, Saderia leaned against him to help him find his balance. When he finally managed to stand, he let out a

long sigh and met her gaze with dark, tired eyes. “I just hope Makero brings good news about the forest when he comes back.”

“Saderia!”

Pushing past a clump of purple bushes, Saderia stepped into the clearing of the Home of the Leopards next to Dash and looked up at the sound of the familiar voice. Standing near the edge of the clearing, Loki waved with a bright smile. Lisa stood beside her and beamed when she spotted Saderia and Dash. Grinning, Saderia waved back and bounded toward the center of the clearing with Dash close behind her. At the back of the clearing, Loki raced forward in a blur of yellow fur while Lisa chased after her.

Skidding to a halt, Saderia froze just as Loki leapt to a halt in front of her. A moment later, Lisa raced forward while Dash caught up and stumbled toward Saderia. Short pants shuddered out of his chest and his eyes looked suddenly clouded with tiredness. Frowning in concern, Saderia watched him closely to see what was wrong.

“Dash, are you okay?” she murmured.

Choking back a heavy pant, Dash glanced up at her with a look that seemed almost dizzy. Taking a deep breath, he nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just didn’t sleep good.”

Saderia’s eyes narrowed with worry. Last night, Dash had tossed and turned fitfully in his sleep. Restlessness had seemed to keep him half-awake and half-asleep the whole night. At the first light of morning, his eyes had drooped with exhaustion and pain.

“Is everything okay?” Loki asked, narrowing her eyes in unease.

Dash shrugged and nodded. “Yeah, everything’s fine, Loki. I’m okay.”

“Well...okay,” she murmured. Shaking herself, she looked over at Saderia and smiled. “It’s nice to see you two again. What brings you to the Home of the Leopards?”

Saderia shrugged and smiled back, trying to shake off a dark feeling of unease. “Nothing much. We just wanted to see how you and Lisa were doing. I talked to my Mom this morning to see if she would let us come. It took a lot of convincing to get her to let us come see you, but she finally agreed that it would be okay so long as we stayed safe.”



Loki grinned. "Parents! My Dad's the same way with letting me go anywhere. They're way too worried for their own good." She rolled her eyes. "So there's been a lot going on with you guys, huh? We heard about you coming back home yesterday at your Mom's meeting, Dash, and we were really excited to hear you were doing better."

"Thanks," Dash said with a weak smile. "How are you and Lisa doing? You're still feeling okay, right?" he added with a worried glance at Lisa.

Lisa flicked her tail and grinned. "I'm feeling great, actually. I haven't really felt sick in a long time. I'm much more awake and there's no pain anymore."

"That's great," Dash murmured, glancing down at his paws.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, giving him a kind gaze.

"I'm feeling fine," he mumbled. "The sickness is gone, after all..."

She flicked him with her tail and smiled shyly. "I'm glad to hear it."

"We heard about some other stuff at the meeting, too," Loki added, giving her a sympathetic gaze. "I'm sorry about your Dad leaving. I'm sure he'll be okay."

Saderia sighed. "I think so, too. It'll be good to find out what's happened to our old home anyway, so I know he's got a good reason for leaving. Hopefully he'll be okay."

Loki shrugged. "I don't think you have to worry too much. I'm sure there's plenty of danger, but he *is* your father. You had to get those tough genes from somewhere."

Saderia grinned. "Maybe you're right." Glancing around at the clearing, she watched groups of leopards move back and forth, talking quietly together. A comforting mood of happiness hung over the clearing and the leopards' eyes glowed more brightly with hope and lightheartedness. More leopards filled the lively clearing than before, glowing with renewed health. Only the sight of their ribs sticking out through their shiny coats made her feel a twinge of worry. They seemed much happier and healthier, but she could tell from their gaunt bodies that they were still troubled with the task of finding food. Had the fruit on the trees around their clearing disappeared overnight as well?

Turning back to Loki, she tried to hide the unease on her face, but her tail flicked nervously back and forth. "What's been going on around

here? Things seem a lot better.”

Loki grinned. “They are getting a little better now. A lot of leopards have returned from the fortress. Maeta has even recovered from the sickness and every now and then she travels back here to check on things. She likes to make sure everything is going smoothly and to check the animals here to make sure there’s no traces of sickness left. She comes here for at least an hour or two every day to check on us and also to see how Tawny’s doing, then she usually goes back to the fortress to help the animals there.”

Saderia’s gaze softened. “That’s nice. How is Tawny?”

Loki shrugged. “She’s fine. My parents and I have been looking after her since she got back from the fortress so Maeta could stay there to help the others. She’s still healthy and playful. She’s been chasing tails and attacking grass nonstop since she got back.”

Saderia couldn’t help but giggle. “That’s great.” She hesitated, then added. “So how are you guys doing as far as food? Have you been able to find any more of it lately?”

Loki frowned. “It’s really strange actually. Just yesterday, the trees were practically overflowing with fruit, but now we can’t find any. A lot of us just think some of the other animals must have gotten it, but it just seems really weird to me.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “Really? That happened around our house, too.”

Loki frowned in confusion. “What? It’s happened in more than one place?”

“It looks like it.” Saderia shifted her paws uneasily, feeling a chill shiver down her spine. “I don’t know what happened. We went out to collect fruit and it was just...gone.”

“It didn’t even seem like it had ever been there,” Dash added, narrowing his eyes in wonder. “There was no sign that it had died from the cold. It was really weird.”

“That is weird.” Loki narrowed her eyes in befuddlement. Shaking herself, she sat back and looked around thoughtfully. “I’m sure there’s some explanation for it.”

“There probably is,” Saderia murmured. “I just can’t think of what it could be.”

She shrugged. "I guess it's best not to worry about it. With any luck, the fruit will come back. On the upside, we haven't had a disaster in forever. Your flood protection really worked. We all know how to avoid the other disasters by now, too."

Saderia managed a smile. "I guess we really have found a way to adapt then."

Loki grinned. "I guess we have. But hey, we're tough. We can survive anything."

A soft rustling noise sounded in the silence of the den, making Saderia's eyelids flutter open. Blinking sleepiness out of her gaze, she tiredly sat up and looked around. She paused when she saw Dash lying next to her, his eyes half-open and narrowed with discomfort. The blanket rustled around them as he turned over, trying to get comfortable. Gritting his teeth, he looked up and stopped when he saw Saderia peering down at him. Pushing the blanket back, he slowly sat up and tried to bite back a painful groan.

Saderia watched him uneasily. "Dash? Are you okay? You don't look good."

He looked away and let out a sigh, shaking his dirty mane out over his face. "Yeah, I feel fine." He winced at the sound of his cracked voice and avoided her worried gaze. Clearing his throat, he muttered, "I...I just slept on the wrong side or something."

She frowned. "Are you sure? You seem...unhealthy."

His eyes flashed and he looked away, his expression tense with worry. "It's nothing. I'm just a little weak from the disease and I'm recovering. That's all."

She hesitated and studied him, feeling a hint of unease. "Well...if you're sure..."

"I'm sure," he promised, turning back to give her a reassuring smile.

"All right..." Her gaze lingered on him for a long moment before she looked into the den. "I guess we should see what's going on. The others are probably up already."

Dash managed a weak smile and touched her shoulder gently with his tail. "You go and say good morning. I'm going to go outside to see if I can find any food."

She frowned. "Are you sure? You don't need my help?"

He shook his head. "I'll be fine. I'll call you if I need anything. I promise."

"All right. I'll come see you after I'm done talking to them. Come on." She flicked him with her tail and nodded toward the entrance to her den before leaping down to the ground. Turning around, she watched Dash carefully ease his way out of bed and frowned when she saw his legs tremble. Looking up, she met his gaze and tried to grin back when he gave her a reassuring smile. Dash stumbled forward as quickly as he could and pressed against her as they padded tiredly out into the main room of the den.

Glancing around the room, Saderia blinked in surprise when she spotted her mother standing in the entrance to her room on the opposite wall of the den, gazing out at the woods. Her amber eyes seemed clouded and distant and her gaze seemed to pierce straight through the trees to something that only she could see. Standing motionless, she let her tail hang limply on the rocky ground and her ears droop. Her dirty fur hung dully from her gaunt body, too thin to hide the sight of her ribs jutting out of her sides.

Saderia stared at her in surprise. "Mom?"

Karenisha blinked as if coming out of a trance and turned around to look at them. "Saderia? Dash?" Her gaze softened a bit. "You're awake, I see."

"Yeah...How long have you been up? We thought you might be gone again."

Karenisha sighed and glanced toward the entrance. "I've been up for a few hours. I was going to go to the fortress, but your aunt and uncle offered to take my place in guarding it. Things seemed to have calmed down a bit lately, so I agreed."

Saderia nodded thoughtfully. "That's good."

The Queen shrugged. "I suppose." Glancing past her, she looked at Dash and managed a smile. "How are you feeling this morning?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "Fine, I guess. I was just going to go look for food."

Karenisha nodded. "Go ahead. Just don't go too far away from the house."

“I won’t.” Giving Saderia a soft flick of his tail, he stumbled toward the entrance, trying to keep his balance and wincing when he tripped across the stone.

Saderia followed him with her eyes until he had finally disappeared behind the wall of stone separating her from the woods outside. Her eyes narrowed with uneasiness and a cold sense of worry lingered even after he was out of sight. Trying to shake off the nervousness, she turned back around to face her mother and felt another stab of unease.

“Mom, is everything okay? You seem kind of upset.”

Karenisha sighed. “I just miss your father. He’s been gone for three days now.”

Saderia winced, feeling her heart ache. Terrifying thoughts of the danger he might have encountered whirled through her mind. She struggled to push away her worries, but an uncomfortable feeling of disquiet lingered, making her blood run cold.

Taking a deep breath, she looked up and tried to find something more cheerful to talk about. “At least that means he might be back soon. He said he might be gone a week, so he could be back in four days. He might already be close to getting through the desert.”

“Hopefully,” Karenisha murmured. “If there are no complications.”

Saderia looked away. “He’ll find a way through it even if there are obstacles.”

Karenisha sighed. “I hope you’re right.” She paused. “So how are Loki and Lisa doing? I didn’t get a chance to come home last night to ask you.”

She shrugged. “They’re all right. They were having trouble finding food, though.”

The Queen sighed. “Everyone’s having that problem. The food seems to be gone.”

Saderia suppressed a shiver and tried to look unbothered. “I’m sure we’ll find some way to get new food. We’ll find a way to survive.”

Karenisha shrugged. “I hope so.” She glanced toward the entrance of the den and let out a tired sigh, her eyes narrowing and her ears drooping. “It was nice to get to stay home and see you, Saderia. I think I’m going to go get some more rest now, though.”

Saderia frowned, but gave her a nod. Months of nonstop work, stress, and hardly any sleep for her mother had passed by. After everything she had done to help the forest, she deserved a rest. “All right. Once Dash comes back in, we’ll probably be in our room.”

Karenisha gave her a tired nod. Tearing her weary gaze off the bright woods, she turned and trailed tiredly back into her room. Her tail dragged against the rough floor, and her shoulders sagged with every step. Peering into her mother’s room, Saderia saw her struggle to pull herself onto the bed, then flop down with a long sigh.

A cold shiver traveled down her spine. Ignoring a lingering feeling of disquiet, she turned and padded toward the entrance of the den. The sun shone down onto the clearing through a opening in the rainbow-colored canopy. Squinting, Saderia stepped onto the stiff grass. Looking around, she let her gaze swing around to the tree rising up just outside the den and peered up into the top branches to find Dash. A frown spread across her face when she couldn’t spot his dark brown fur through the leaves.

Feeling a tingle of unease, she bounded toward the tree and looked up to try to spot him from directly underneath the tree. A cold chill swept over her when she saw nothing but blue green leaves. Narrowing her eyes, she turned around and scanned the woods bordering her house for any sign of Dash, letting her gaze flick up to the tops of the trees. She couldn’t see any hint of Dash or fruit hiding in any of them.

“Dash!” she called, trying to ignore a shiver of worry. Her eyes flicked rapidly across the grassy clearing, searching for any sign of his dark fur. Pricking her ears, she listened for any response, then froze when the faint sound of coughing reached her ears.

Her heart skipped. Whirling around, she bounded toward the sound and felt her heart beat faster when it grew louder. Bunching her muscles, she crashed through the yellow bushes on the edge of the woods. Her paws slammed the ground as she raced forward, searching for the source of the sound. Dodging around an oak tree, she froze.

Dash sat a few feet in front of her, hiding under the shade of a tree with purple-leafed branches. Harsh, choking coughs shuddered out of his chest, making his whole body shudder. He clamped a shaky paw over his mouth to try to swallow back the sneezes, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t stop the rough coughing. His sides heaved with heavy pants as

he struggled to keep himself standing and tears glimmered on the edges of his eyes. Blood dribbled onto the grassy ground below him.

Saderia's eyes widened in horror. Ducking behind a tree, she stared at him in disbelief, feeling her whole body grow cold with fear. Memories of the day they discovered Lisa's sickness flashed through her mind, making her shiver with dread. Dash was supposed to be better, but what if he was still sick? Taking a deep breath, she tried to ignore the fear creeping up her spine and looked up when she heard the harsh sound die away. Hidden behind the tree, she watched Dash take a shaky breath and push himself to his paws. His legs shook and when he tried to step forward, he nearly collapsed. Struggling to breathe, he picked himself up and padded shakily forward.

Saderia hid behind the tree when he looked in her direction. Glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, she took a deep breath and silently darted away from him. Shivers of fear raced up her spine as she darted through the woods. Terrifying thoughts of the sick animals she had witnessed in the neighborhoods burned in her mind. She wanted to hope that the coughing was just a lingering symptom that he was recovering from, but doubt haunted her. What if Dash was sick? What would they do then?

Lunging forward, she raced out of the woods and darted toward her home. She felt lightheaded and short of breath when she leapt onto the cold stone floor of her den. Looking around, she tried to catch her breath. Worried thoughts swirled through her mind, making her feel weak with fear. Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm down and ignore the terrifying thoughts, but the feeling of unease refused to go away.

"Saderia?" Her eyes widened in surprise and she whirled around at the sound of the soft voice. She froze when she spotted Dash standing in the entrance of the den, his legs trembling and his eyes clouded with pain and fear.

She blinked and stumbled toward him. "Dash? Are you all right?"

He winced and looked down. "I'm fine. I...I couldn't find any fruit...I'm sorry."

"It's fine. It doesn't matter," she stammered, waving away his apologies.

Dash glanced up at her and frowned. "Are you okay? You seem kind of upset."

Saderia took a deep breath and tried to swallow back her worry. Sitting down in front of him, she studied him closely, doing her best to hide the fear shining in her eyes. "I...I'm just a little worried about you. Ever since you came back from the fortress, I've just been kind of concerned about...how you would feel." She hesitated for a long moment. "These past few days, you've seemed a little...sick."

His eyes widened in alarm. "It's nothing to worry about," he said quickly. "I'm still recovering, that's all. I just feel a little weak, but it's nothing bad. I'm fine. I swear."

She let out a shaky breath. "Dash, you really don't seem to be doing well. When we saw Lisa, she didn't have *any* symptoms. You seem to be getting worse, not better."

"She got out earlier than I did," he insisted, avoiding her gaze. "She had a longer time to get better. Different animals take longer to recover than others sometimes."

"Dash..."

"I'm not sick," he insisted, his eyes flashing. "Really, I'm fine. I'll *be* fine."

She stared at him with dull, clouded eyes. "Are you sure?" she whispered.

"Yes," he promised. "I'm sure. You have nothing to worry about. I'm not sick."

Saderia watched him with dark eyes and said nothing. He smiled reassuringly and his dull amber eyes gleamed with weak confidence. She couldn't return the smile. No matter what he said or how much she tried to believe his words, it couldn't erase what she had seen just a few minutes ago and what she had witnessed over the past few days. The question wasn't whether he was sick or not. The question was what to do if he was.

"Dad, what's going on?" Jeb stood on the edge of the drained spring, staring down at the pile of food with stunned eyes. The pile of fruit had risen higher than he had ever seen in one night. "Why isn't anyone returning the food anymore?"



Silence met his words. When he glanced back, he saw his father standing behind him with a dark, grave look on his face. Hushed whispers sounded around the Spring. Terror haunted the outlaws' dark eyes and every criminal cast nervous glances at the area around them. Their anxious, horrified voices sent shivers racing down Jeb's spine.

"They've stopped because the creatures brutally murdered one of us." Jati stepped out from their cave den and stalked toward them, her blue and gray eyes narrowed and darkened with fear and disgust. She stopped beside Telku and stared down at her paws.

Jeb gaped in horror. A jolt of shock raced through his body. Had someone really been killed? He glanced up at his father with stunned eyes, silently questioning him.

Telku lowered his head and nodded. "Yes, Jeb, it's true."

Jeb gaped in shock. "What? H-how? How do you know?"

Jati gritted her teeth and nervously flicked her tail. "Last night while you were asleep, Secka returned from stealing the fruit. He was carrying the dead kraguer's body and he laid him down to call a meeting. When everyone was gathered, he announced that the kraguer had been savaged by the creatures when they caught him trying to return the fruit." She shook her head and shivered. "We didn't wake you up to see it, Jeb. There was hardly anything left of him. Blood covered his whole body so that we could barely even see him, and he was practically torn to shreds. It would have given you nightmares."

Jeb stared at her in horror, feeling a twinge of shock and terror. Violent shivers raced through his body, making him feel cold with dismay. Was it really true?

"What your mother says is true, Jeben," Telku muttered with a dark glance at his paws. "It was horrifying. Maybe...maybe Secka was right all along. I'd like to believe that the creatures didn't do it...but the evidence was right there. They killed him..."

"They *destroyed* him," Jati snarled. "There was hardly anything left of him. I could barely stand to look at what they did."

Telku let out a shaky breath. "Exactly. If the creatures could do something like that, whether I want to believe it or not, then we are not going to keep returning the fruit. I don't want to endanger my family. None of us should ever have to suffer that fate."

Jeb gaped at him in shock and dismay, feeling a twinge of betrayal burn in his chest. After he had stuck up for the creatures, they had done something horrible. He opened his mouth to speak, but his words caught in his throat. A hint of wonder and unease burned in his mind. "Dad...where was Secka when the kraguer was killed?"

Telku shook his head and shrugged. "I have no idea. Let's just get to sleep, Jeb. Or if you want to stay out here, that's fine." He paused, then looked up and firmly met his eyes. "Just promise me one thing, Jeb. You will never ever leave this Spring again."

Broken moonlight shone down on a silent clearing, turning the grass to silver and casting an eerie glow over the rocky dens. Saderia leapt out from behind a clump of bushes and staggered into the clearing of the Home of the Leopards, panting and looking around wildly. Nothing moved in the dark neighborhood. Eerie shadows slithered across the ground as the leaves above blocked out the moon. Scanning the neighborhood desperately, Saderia bounded toward one of the closest dens. Holding her breath, she crept up to a tiny hole in the side of the den and jumped up to peer inside. A tiny leopard laid on top of a stony bed, wrapped up in a thin blanket and sleeping restlessly.

Saderia's heart leapt with hope. "Lisa!" she hissed. "Lisa, wake up! It's Saderia!"

Lisa's eyelids fluttered open and she slowly pushed herself up, blinking sleepily. Glancing toward the window, she jumped in alarm when she spotted Saderia. "Princess Saderia?" she whispered with a shaky breath. "What...what are you doing here?"

Saderia glanced over her shoulder, then leaned closer to the window. "I need your help," she hissed. "Please, Lisa, it's important."

Lisa blinked and frowned. "Um...okay. What can I do?"

She took a deep shaky breath. "I need you to ask Maeta if...if the disease could come back and if it's better or worse than when an animal had it before. I can't ask her because then it would seem suspicious and she might just jump to conclusions and start doing things without giving me any answers. I don't want to worry Dash and my family."

Lisa blinked in surprise. "Saderia, is...is everything all right?"

She let out a long sigh. "I don't know yet. Can you please just ask her?"

Lisa hesitated uncertainly. "Well, I could, but I already know the answer."

Saderia's heart leapt with hope. "You do?"

"Yeah, I asked her once. I was a bit worried when I came back. She said I was fine, but she did tell me what would happen if the disease did come back."

Saderia's eyes grew wide with urgency. "You have to tell me!"

Lisa shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know... Nothing bad is happening, right?"

She let out a hiss of frustration. "I won't know until you tell me what *you* know!"

Lisa blinked in surprise and hesitated. "Well, when a sick animal gets over the disease quickly, they run a higher risk of getting the disease back. In most cases, she said the disease is worse when it comes back, especially if it was never really bad in its first stage. She also said the disease progresses much faster than the first time, and it's worse if the animal who gets the disease is weakened by hunger or some other malady first."

Saderia stared at her with wide eyes, feeling her heart skip in her chest. "Is it...fatal? What are the chances that the disease won't be worse?"

Lisa looked down at her paws. "Sometimes it is fatal," she murmured. "And the chances of it not being worse aren't very likely."

Saderia stared at her in horror, feeling a cold chill turn her blood to ice.

Lisa's eyes narrowed in worry. "Saderia, is everything okay? What's going on?"

Without bothering to answer, Saderia staggered away from the window, her heart pounding rapidly. Looking around at the silent clearing, she bit her lip and leapt toward the woods. She dove into a clump of bushes and took off running as fast as she could, not once looking back at the sleepy neighborhood. Her heart ached with fear as terrifying thoughts of the sickness swirled through her head. Lisa's words burned in her mind. Ignoring the dark blur of trees and bushes, she raced home as fast as she could. Branches tore at her fur, but she barely noticed the pain. Dodging

around a strong oak tree, she burst out from behind a clump of bushes and lunged into the clearing surrounding her den. She whirled around to face the den, then froze. A sharp, terrified scream echoed through the forest, rising from the den and booming from inside the room of her mother.

# Chapter Nineteen

## Sixth Sense

Shivers raced down Saderia's spine and her eyes widened in shock. Lunging forward, she raced toward the house, feeling her heart skip in her chest and her breath catch in her throat. Darting past the rocky wall of her home, she turned to look inside and froze in the jagged entrance to the den. Above her, the moon drifted behind a dark, sinister cloud, plunging the den into blackness. A freezing wind whipped past her, rustling her fur and sending an icy chill racing to every inch of her body.

Swallowing back the bitter taste of fear, she took a deep breath and padded into the den. Squinting through the blackness, she turned to her mother's room and spotted a dark figure standing in the entrance. Dash's amber eyes flashed in the dim light when the figure turned around and met her stare, nearly freezing her in place. A hint of moonlight glinted through the clouds, lighting up the entrance to her mother's room. Cia and Uncle Jash stood in the room, hovering over Karenisha's bed. Dash lingered in the entrance, looking back at her with worried eyes. A soft gasp sounded from inside the room.

"Mom!" Saderia called, pushing past Dash and bounding forward. Skidding to a halt beside Cia and Uncle Jash, she looked down and blinked in shock when she saw her mother lying on her back, her eyes wide and distant with terror. "Wh-what happened to her?" she stammered, looking up at her aunt and uncle. "What's going on?"

Cia shook her head in alarm. "I don't know. She just screamed and..."

"Cia." Saderia jumped at the sound of Karenisha's rasping voice and glanced down at her mother in surprise. The Queen rolled onto her side and laid staring up at her twin sister, her eyes glistening with fear and burning into the eyes of Saderia's aunt.

Cia gulped and leaned down. "Yes, Karenisha? What is it? What's wrong?"

Karenisha lurched forward and stared at Cia in horror, her paws trembling with fear. "Cia, I...I saw..." She trailed off and shook her head in dismay. "Cia, it can't be..."

Saderia stared at her mother with stunned eyes, her mind whirling with fear. What was she talking about? Looking up, she saw understanding dawn in Cia's eyes as her aunt drew back. Behind her, she saw the same light of realization appear in Dash's eyes.

"What did you see?" Cia murmured, watching her sister closely.

"I..." Karenisha trailed off and gazed around the room. Horror gleamed in her eyes when she spotted Saderia. "Get her out of here," she gasped. "And Dash, too!"

Saderia blinked in surprise. "Wh-what? Why? Mom, what's going on?"

"They can't know. It can't be true," she whispered. "They don't need to know..."

Cia looked up sharply and narrowed her eyes. "Jash, take Saderia and Dash out of this room and out of this house. I need to speak with Karenisha alone."

Uncle Jash looked up at her in surprise. "What? Cia, what's going on?"

Cia placed a tail calmly on Uncle Jash shoulder. "I need to speak with Karenisha alone," she repeated. "Karenisha will be fine, but only if I get a chance to figure out what's wrong. You need to take them and leave, so I can talk to her. She will be fine."

Uncle Jash cast an uneasy glance at Karenisha before nodding. Turning around, he flicked Saderia with his tail and gestured for her to follow him out of the room.

Saderia hesitated, her heart pounding with worry. "Are you sure she'll be okay?"

Cia nodded sternly. "Yes, I'm sure. Now go, Saderia."

Saderia stared at her mother's terrified expression before reluctantly turning to trail after her uncle. Dash's uneasy gaze lingered on the Queen's face until he finally turned and fell into step beside Saderia. Out of the corner of her eye, Saderia saw her mother lean closer to Cia and whisper something in a trembling voice. Outside, the moon slithered back into hiding and the tiny beam of light illuminating the tigers faded away.

Taking a deep breath, Saderia let her paws slip onto the grass outside her home and tried to ignore the rush of frigid air that whistled past her. Dash shivered beside her as the three of them crept outside and sat down in front of the house, staring at the entrance.

“What’s going on?” Saderia whispered, glancing up at Dash.

Dash tried to hide a shiver. “It seems like she had some sort of Dream.”

Saderia blinked. “But Dreams aren’t real.” A shiver ran down her spine at the words. The image of Karenisha’s terrified face and the fear in her distant gaze flashed through her mind. How could something that wasn’t real cause her to feel such terror?

Uncle Jash blinked in shock. “What? What do you mean Dreams aren’t real?”

Dash heaved a sigh. “Never mind, Jash. Saderia just...Just never mind.”

Saderia took a deep breath, trying to ignore her fear. A sharp pain stabbed at her heart when she remembered what she had done before hearing her mother’s scream. Lowering her voice to a whisper, she leaned closer to Dash and hissed in his ear. “Dash, I need to talk to you about something. You seem like you’re getting sick again and...”

“I’m not sick.” He drew back and narrowed his eyes. “We’ve been through this.”

She let out a sharp hiss. “Can’t you just listen to reason? Even if you’re not sick, it wouldn’t hurt to go to Maeta to make sure!”

“I don’t need to...”

She bristled and cut him off. “Dash, listen. I asked Lisa about the disease and she said that if it comes back, it’s usually worse than before. Sometimes it’s *fatal*.”

Dash’s eyes widened in shock. “But...Saderia, I’m really going to be okay.”

She narrowed her eyes. “If you’re so sure, then it can’t hurt to see Maeta, can it?”

Dash opened his mouth to protest, then let out a long, reluctant sigh. “Fine.”

“Tomorrow morning, as soon as I know Mom’s okay, we’re going to the Home of the Leopards and you’re going to see Maeta.”

He looked away and nodded weakly.

Saderia laid her tail gently over his shoulder and opened her mouth to say something, then broke off in surprise when a shout boomed from inside the house.

“Karenisha, stop it! You don’t know that! You could be wrong!”

Karenisha’s loud hiss followed Cia’s stern words. “I know what I saw, Cia!”

“Your sense isn’t that clear! It could be a misinterpretation!”

Karenisha let out a furious growl. “What am I supposed to do? Ask Saderia to Dream about whether or not her—”

Cia hissed. “I never said we should do that! It could just be a misinterpretation—”

Claws scraped against stone. “How, Cia, how?! Hunters! *Hunters*, Cia!”

A long sigh sounded from the den. “I don’t know how, but you have to hope—”

Karenisha cut her off with a furious hiss. “What good is hope going to do?!”

Saderia’s eyes widened as the sharp voices died away to a whisper she couldn’t hear. Dash and Uncle Jash stood stiffly beside her, watching the house with stunned faces and confusion bright in their amber and blue eyes. Uncle Jash blinked as if to break out of a trance and glanced back and forth between Saderia and Dash. “Um...perhaps we should look for food while we have the chance?” he stammered, looking uncomfortably away.

Dash sighed. “Yeah, sounds great.” He flicked Saderia with his tail. “Come on.”

She lingered to try to catch more of the conversation, but her mother and aunt’s voices remained quiet. Forcing herself to turn away from the house, she tried to ignore the cold fear, but the unease refused to fade. A dark sense of worry burned in her chest when she thought of the conversation she had overheard. Months had passed since they had had to deal with the problems in their old forest. Why would her mother mention hunters?

Leaping up into one of the closest trees, she tried to push away her worry, but her thoughts lingered. Memories of her mother’s scream and the fear in her eyes flashed through her mind and Lisa’s soft words whispered



in her ears. No matter how terrified her mother had felt, Dreams *couldn't* exist...but remembering everything that had happened that night, she almost wished they did. She could use a miracle in the days to come.

“Saderia.” Saderia’s eyelids fluttered and she slowly opened her eyes into a flood of bright yellow light. Squinting against the shimmering sunlight, she lifted her head. Soft fur brushed her side and she looked down to see Dash lying beside her, wincing in his sleep. His unruly dark brown mane was splayed out over the bed and his paws jutted out in every direction. His eyes were narrowed in his sleep and when she gently brushed his shoulder, he felt tense. A chill swept over her when she realized how much pain he felt.

Letting out a long sigh, she looked up and paused when she saw Cia standing in the entrance to her room. “Saderia,” her aunt repeated. “I’m sorry to wake you up.”

Saderia blinked and shook her head. “Oh, no, it’s...okay.” Shifting away from Dash, she sat back and lowered her voice so as not to wake him up. “How’s Mom?”

Cia let out a sigh. “She’s doing fine. She’s still a little shaky and upset, though, so I wouldn’t bother her. She’s still sleeping and she needs her rest. Try not to disturb her.”

“I won’t,” Saderia murmured, her eyes clouding with worry and confusion. “Cia...what exactly happened to her? What were you two talking about last night?”

Cia looked away to avoid her gaze. “That’s none of your concern. Karenisha just had a nasty Dream. She should be better soon...I hope.”

Saderia let out a long sigh. “Well...okay.”

Cia took a deep breath. “I’m sure your mother will be fine, Saderia. I just wanted to let you know how your mother was doing since you didn’t get to know last night.”

She looked away. “All right. Thanks.”

Cia nodded and slowly backed out of the room, her blue eyes lingering on Saderia’s face until she disappeared behind the wall. Saderia let out a long breath and leaned back. Last night, after Saderia had searched the trees half-heartedly for food, Cia had come outside to tell them to return to their beds. She hadn’t said a word about how Karenisha was doing or

what had scared her and Saderia doubted she would learn what had caused her mother so much fear from Cia. On her way back to her room, Saderia had spotted Karenisha lying on her side. A flash of her wide eyes had shone through the darkness and all Saderia had seen in her amber irises was emptiness. The night had passed by slowly until Saderia fell into a fitful sleep, not knowing what was wrong with her mother.

Shaking the thoughts away, she saw Dash's eyes flutter open. She frowned. "Dash? I didn't wake you up, did I?"

He slowly shook his head and pushed himself up to face her. His amber eyes bored into hers, pleading and wide with fear.

She narrowed her eyes to ignore the flood of sympathy that rushed through her. "Dash, we're going to Maeta today and there isn't going to be an argument about it."

He let out a long sigh. "I don't see the point..."

"I do," she said, giving him a stern glance. "Now come on. We need to get going."

Without giving him a chance to protest, she leapt onto the ground, then narrowed her eyes. Letting out a reluctant sigh, Dash climbed down and followed her out of the room.

"Cia!" Saderia called, glancing over at the rocky table where her aunt and uncle were sitting and talking quietly. "Can we go to the Home of the Leopards?"

Cia narrowed her eyes. "Do you have to?"

"Yes. It's important." She gave Dash a sharp glare when he tried to protest.

Cia hesitated, then slowly nodded. "All right. Just try to get back soon."

"We will," Saderia promised. Turning around, she guided Dash toward the woods, refusing to look at his frightened expression. One way or another, she was going to find out what was happening with him and if there was any way she could save him.

The wide clearing of the Home of the Leopards spread out in front of them, filled with life and activity. Sunlight shimmered down into the grassy neighborhood, shining on the tawny-orange fur of the leopards. The clamor of excited conversation filled the warm air as the leopards walked

alongside one another, discussing happy recent events. The lively clearing seemed like a different world compared to the cold, abandoned neighborhood Saderia had stumbled into the night she had visited Lisa.

Scanning the clearing, she let her gaze fall on a strong leopard standing near one of the dens, looking out with proud brown eyes. Her heart skipped with hope and she bounded forward with Dash trailing reluctantly behind her. “Maeta!” she called.

The leopard leader looked up when she skidded to a halt in front of her and managed a slight smile. “Princess Saderia, Prince Dash. What can I do for you?”

Saderia hesitated and lowered her voice. “Can we talk to you in private?”

Maeta hesitated, then flicked her tail and led them into the tiny den behind her. Pausing in a narrow hallway, she turned to look down at them. “What’s this about?”

Saderia took a deep breath. “Can you check Dash for the disease? I’m a bit worried.”

Maeta’s eyes darkened. “Of course, Princess Saderia. Dash, please come closer.”

Dash looked down. “I think she’s just making a big deal out of nothing,” he murmured, reluctantly stepping toward her and sitting down in front of her.

Ignoring his words, Maeta stepped forward and carefully checked him over, circling him and studying him closely. “Have there been any signs?”

“No,” Dash muttered. “I’ve been fine.”

Maeta flicked her tail. “Saderia? Have you noticed anything?”

Saderia shifted uncomfortably. “He seems kind of tired and weak lately. The other day, I found him coughing and I think there might have been blood in his cough.”

Dash looked up at her in shock. “You...you saw that?”

Saderia looked away. Maeta let out a long sigh. “Then the diagnosis is clear.”

She blinked. “What is it?”

Maeta remained silent for a long moment before finally taking a deep breath and meeting her gaze with grave brown eyes. “Dash has the

disease.”

Saderia’s heart sank and a wave of fear and despair swept over her. Dash looked up in shock, his amber eyes growing wide with horror. Saderia’s ears drooped with dismay and she stared up at Maeta with pleading eyes. “Is he...worse off than before?”

Maeta sighed. “It’s possible that he’s not any worse, but that is typically the case.”

Her heart started to beat faster. “And you still haven’t found a cure?”

The leopard leader looked down. “I’m afraid not. None of the herbs I have found so far have even touched the disease. New herbs are becoming scarce as well. They’re not growing well in this cold and they’re starting to die. The best thing you can do to help Dash is to make sure he keeps up his strength by eating as much food as possible.”

Saderia blinked in shock and started to feel dizzy. “But...but Dad took most of the food with him when he left.” Her heart skipped. “We can’t find any more fruit no matter where we look and we’re almost out. We can only ration the food we have left so much.”

Maeta heaved a sigh. “I’m sorry, Saderia, but there is nothing I can do. I can keep trying to find a cure with what little herbs are left, but I don’t have high hopes for them.”

Dash’s face grew pale with fear. “Am...am I going to die?”

Maeta sighed. “Dash, there’s still a chance you can fight it. Not all hope is lost.”

“How much of a chance?” he stammered. “We barely have any food!”

Maeta lowered her gaze to the ground and didn’t respond.

Saderia took a deep breath. “All right. Thank you, Maeta. I guess we’ll just go.”

Maeta let out a long sigh. “I’m sorry. I wish you both the best of luck.”

Saderia nodded bleakly and slowly turned to walk out of the den. Dash stepped forward to stand beside her, his eyes wide and distant with fear. Turning to look out of the den and see the sun shimmering in the sky, Saderia let out a soft breath and tried to stop the rapid beating of her heart. What if luck was the only thing that could help them?

Cia looked up from the rocky table at the sound of soft paw steps and frowned when she saw Saderia and Dash step inside. "Everything all right?"

Saderia looked up at her aunt with dull amber eyes. Dash sat down beside her and stared at his paws, refusing to look up. Glancing at Dash and Cia, Saderia took a deep breath and let it out. "We went to see Maeta," she murmured. "Dash...has the disease."

Cia's eyes widened in shock. "What? He's sick again?"

Saderia looked down at her paws. "It looks like it."

She stared at them in dismay. "Is he going to be okay?"

She narrowed her eyes. "He's going to be fine. But from now on, he'll be getting the biggest ration whenever we eat. He needs to keep up his strength."

Cia opened her mouth to respond, then paused. Frowning, Saderia looked up to see Karenisha standing in the entrance of her room. Her amber eyes were bloodshot and dull and when she glanced around at them, she hardly seemed to see them at all.

Closing her mouth, Cia whirled around to meet Saderia's gaze and lowered her voice to a quiet hiss. "Don't tell your mother about this. I'll take care of it."

Saderia blinked in surprise. Karenisha was the one she had hoped would help her deal with this. Was it really wise to hide Dash's sickness from her?

Karenisha let her dull gaze fall on Saderia. "What's going on?" she rasped.

Saderia glanced at Cia and exchanged an uneasy glance with Dash. Taking a deep breath, she tried to look unbothered. "N-nothing, Mom. Nothing to worry about."

The Queen frowned, then let her gaze drift away from her. "Oh. Okay..."

Cia stepped forward and brushed up against her sister with a stern but comforting look in her eyes. "Karenisha, you should be resting. Why don't you go lay down?"

Karenisha shrugged and let her sister lead her back to her room. Looking over her shoulder, Cia met Saderia's eyes and gave her a slight nod

to tell her they would discuss it later. Letting out a soft sigh, Saderia nodded back. She rested her tail on Dash's shoulder and led him back to her room before helping him onto the bed. Through the entrance to her room, she saw Karenisha and Cia disappear into the Queen's room.

Taking a deep breath, Saderia tried to ignore her fear. "What are we going to do? We've got to find more food. There's got to be more *somewhere*." She let out a sigh. "I guess I'll look later. I'll probably go farther than usual. It's got to be *somewhere*."

Dash looked away. "I doubt there will be more. It all seems to have disappeared."

Saderia stared at him in disbelief. "But that's not possible."

He let out a long sigh. "It is here."

Saderia bit her lip and looked away, unable to staunch the feelings of doubt. Shaking her head, she took a deep breath and leapt to the ground. "It can't all be gone," she murmured. "I'm going out to look now and I'm going to bring some back home."

Dash let out a soft breath and nodded. "All right, Saderia. Good luck."

Nodding tensely, she raced out of the room. All that mattered was helping Dash get better. There had to be food out there. There had to be something that could help him.

Darkness hung over the forest, shrouding the tall trees with a thick layer of blackness. Gray clouds crowded the sky, blocking out the moon's silver light. Saderia's paws dragged against the grass and her eyelids drooped with exhaustion. Another night had dragged by since she had learned about Dash's sickness days ago in the Home of the Leopards. Despite Dash's protests, she had snuck out into the freezing forest hours ago to search for food. As usual, she was returning empty-handed.

Cuts and bruises covered her sides. Tree branches had raked at her fur, weeds had tangled around her paws, and thick roots had reached up to trip her. Even after fighting her way through the forest, she had yet to stumble upon a plant with even a tiny piece of fruit or berries. Not a hint of food was left on any of the trees. The disappearance of all food wasn't impossible. It was a reality she had become way too familiar with.

Trying to ignore the sticky blood clinging to her sore paws, she pushed through another prickly clump of brush and stopped on the edge of the clearing. Her den rose up just in front of her, making her body feel weak with relief. Taking a step forward, she started to walk toward the den, then froze when two soft voices drifted over to her.

Peering through the darkness, she felt a jolt of fear when she spotted Cia and Karenisha sitting outside the den. Without thinking, she dove behind a nearby bush to hide, afraid they would catch her sneaking out. Peeking through the bush, she felt her heart skip when she realized they were talking about Karenisha's strange Dream.

"Karenisha, Makero is strong. He can survive this." Cia glanced up at the sky, then looked over to face her sister. "You must have seen something different..."

Makero? Saderia frowned in unease. What did her father have to do with it?

Karenisha narrowed her eyes as she gazed up at the cloudy sky. "You think I want to believe what I saw? Maybe you're right, but what if you're not?"

Cia let out a long sigh. "Karenisha, you yourself have told me many times that your Dream sense is flawed. You said the scene was blurry..."

"It doesn't matter how blurred my vision was in the Dream," she muttered, turning away from her sister. "I know it was Makero. And I know there were hunters."

Hunters? A cold chill swept over Saderia's body, making her heart speed up. What did hunters have to do with her father?

Cia frowned. "Even if you did see Makero and hunters, you don't know if they..."

"Yes, I do." Karenisha looked sharply back at her sister, her amber eyes bright with pain. "I saw what happened to Makero."

Cia patted her gently with her tail. "Karenisha..."

"Cia, I saw him." She bit her lip in agony. "I saw what they did. He's dead!"

Saderia's heart stopped. *What?*

Cia wrapped her paw around her sister's paw. "Karenisha, you don't know..."

“I saw the hunters!” she spat, her eyes blazing. “I saw the guns they had in their hands and I heard the shot they fired! I saw Makero fall! He was lying dead on the ground.”

“What?” Before she could think, Saderia burst out of the bushes and stared at them in horror, her eyes wide with shock and disbelief.

Cia and Karenisha whipped around and froze, their eyes widening in dismay.

“Saderia!” Cia gasped. “How...How long were you hiding there?”

“Long enough!” she snapped, her eyes blazing. Whipping around, she glared at Karenisha and felt her paws tremble. “How can you think Dad is dead?”

Karenisha stared up at her with wide eyes. “Saderia, you...you don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t!” she shouted. “I don’t understand why you would make up something this horrible!”

Karenisha shook her head frantically. “I didn’t make it up! I...”

“You’re a liar!” she snarled, feeling her fur bristle. “My Dad is fine! He’s coming back! All you’ve done is make up stupid lies based on a Dream that doesn’t even exist!”

Cia leapt to her paws and narrowed her eyes. “Saderia, that’s enough!”

She glared at her aunt. “Why? You can’t possibly believe this!”

Her mother blinked in fear. “But I saw him...I saw him lying on the ground and...”

“I heard!” she hissed. “And I don’t believe a word of it! Dreams don’t exist, Mom! They’re nothing but lies!” She shook her head desperately, feeling tears sting the corners of her eyes. “You’ll see when he comes back!” Without waiting for her mother to respond, she whirled around and lunged past them into the house. The stunned, painful looks on her aunt and mother’s faces burned into her fur as she darted away from them.

Gritting her teeth, she raced into her room. Tears pricked at her eyes and pain burned in her heart as she dove under her blanket and squeezed her eyes shut to keep the tears from spilling over. A sharp cry sounded close beside her and the blankets rustled when Dash jolted upward. Guilt seeped



into Saderia's heart when she realized he had been sleeping and she buried her face in her paws, refusing to look up and meet his gaze.

His soft paw gently brushed up against her shoulder. "Saderia... What's wrong?"

She buried her face deeper into her paws. "She's lying! It's a lie!"

Dash blinked in surprise. "What are you talking about? Who's lying?"

She shook her head frantically, feeling a tiny tear slip down her face. "My Dad is going to be okay," she whispered. "He'll be back soon."

Dash frowned in confusion. "All right, Saderia. Um..." He hesitated for a long moment, trying to understand what was upsetting her. "Is this about a Dream you had?"

She curled her lip in disgust. "Dreams," she spat. "Don't *ever* mention Dreams again. They're lies and the only magical thing they do is bring problems into our lives."

Dash blinked in shock. "Then what's wrong? Can't you tell me?"

She shook her head miserably. "No. I don't ever want to talk about it."

He frowned in confusion, but comfortingly brushed her shoulder. "Are you sure?"

Taking a shaky breath, she nodded and looked at her paws. "Yeah, I'm sure."

He let out a sigh and pulled the thin blanket onto her back. "Why don't you try to get some rest then? You've been looking for food every night. It's not good for you."

She let out a shaky breath and curled up closer to Dash. "All right. If you say so."

Dash gave her a weak smile and rested his tail over her side. Closing her eyes, Saderia tried to relax and ignore the sticky blood clinging to her trembling paws. With her eyes shut tight, the only thing she could hear was Karenisha's painful words echoing in the darkness. Pressing closer to Dash, she struggled to push the thoughts away and calm the fear building in her chest until she finally slipped into unconsciousness.

Darkness surrounded her, closing in on her from all directions. The hard edges of stone shone through the blackness, outlining the walls and

floor of a cold, silent den. Through the gloom shrouding the room, she could just barely make out a tiny stone bed sitting far off in the distance. Lying on top of it was a figure hidden in shadow. His dirty, tangled brown fur stuck out in clumps and his dark mane laid splayed across the freezing rock. His ribs jutted out through the thin fur on his gaunt body and his paws laid spread out in all directions. Soft, wheezing breath filled the quiet air in the frigid den.

Feeling her heart beat frantically in her chest, she lunged forward and darted toward him as fast as she could. The scent of sickness and the harsh sound of his breath grew stronger and louder as she skidded to a halt in front of him. Leaping up onto the bed, she lifted his head in her paws and stared down into his dirty face. Slowly his eyes fluttered open and she felt her heart freeze in her chest with an overwhelming feeling of horror. Two dull, blank eyes stared into her soul, completely empty of any sign of life.

She stumbled back with a gasp and squeezed her eyes shut. When her eyes fluttered open again, she couldn't tell if the world in front of her was real or still a dream.

# Chapter Twenty

## Miracle

Light spilled into the den, but the chilly air seemed to freeze what little warmth the sun's bright rays offered. Days had passed by and each time Saderia woke to see sunbeams seeping into the den, they seemed a little colder. Silence hung in the air, unbroken by the sound of talking or birdsong. Saderia sat up in her bed and stared down at Dash, ignoring the light creeping across the floor.

His ribs poked out through tufts of unruly, filthy fur and his grimy mane hung limply over his face, blocking his eyes from sight. A low, hungry growl from his stomach interrupted the silence of the morning while he rubbed his gaunt belly with a weak, shaky paw. His sides heaved with every raw, wheezing breath he took. When she pressed a paw up against his, it felt as if she was touching a block of ice that drained away every last bit of warmth. Blood stained his teeth from when he had erupted into fits of coughing and bruises covered his body from when he had stumbled. His body felt frozen, but when she leaned closer to his sweaty face, she could feel intense heat rolling off of him in waves.

Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to look away from him. Every day, she woke up to find Dash looking a little worse, and every morning, she padded out of her room to find the pile of food even smaller than the night before. The fear building in her chest rose every time she noticed, but every night, she forced herself to keep looking for food. She couldn't give up hope that there was something out there to help Dash.

Flicking through a mental list of all the places she had already searched for food, she tried to think of a new area to investigate. "All right," she said when the idea struck her. "I think I know a few new places I can check for food. I'll tell Cia and Uncle Jash I'm going out and come back when they want me to. Then I can just sneak out later..." She trailed off thoughtfully, not noticing that Dash never lifted his head to look at her. "I'll

probably be out for a few hours. Hopefully, Cia and Uncle Jash won't mind too much," she murmured, deep in thought.

Dash winced beside her, but kept his gaze trained on his paws and his face shadowed by his tangled mane. She didn't notice when he didn't try to meet her eyes.

She looked out and took a deep breath. "I'll probably see you at dusk and hopefully I'll have food with me." Pulling herself up, she bunched her muscles to leap down, but before she could move, Dash's shaky paw shot out and slammed down on her paw. She looked up at him in surprise as his paw curled around hers and held it as tightly as he could. Hanging his head, he still didn't look up to meet her stunned stare.

She frowned, feeling fear burn her chest. "Dash? What's wrong?"

Letting his dark brown mane slip farther over his face, Dash didn't look up for what seemed like ages. After a long hesitation, he slowly lifted his head and met Saderia's gaze with amber eyes bright with fear. Tightening his grip around her paw, he stared at her with a desperate, pleading look, making her blood run cold.

"Don't go," he choked out in a raw, dry voice.

Saderia blinked in surprise. "But...I have to go out to look for food..."

He shook his head miserably and stared at her with pleading eyes. "No, Saderia, *please*." His paw shook and his voice became so quiet she could barely hear him. "Stay."

She stared at him in surprise and felt her heart begin to beat faster. "But..."

"Saderia, *please*." Anguish gleamed in his desperate amber eyes. "Don't leave me here alone. Please." He trembled with cold and pain. Gritting his teeth, he squeezed his eyes shut and stared down at his paws, his sides heaving with harsh pants and his legs shaking with weakness. "I don't want you to go," he choked out. "I'm scared."

Cold fear spread to every inch of her body. "Scared of what?" she whispered.

Dash winced and looked down, hunching over to try to keep himself warm and stop the violent shaking. His paw held desperately on to hers, as if it was the only thing keeping him from fainting. Pain and terror seared Saderia's chest and she took a long, deep breath to try to calm herself down.

Leaning back, she tried not to let her paw shake with fear underneath his. "Okay," she murmured. "I'll stay."

Dash looked up at her sharply as relief spread across his face. Staring back into his eyes, Saderia didn't miss the flicker of pain that hid behind the glow of joy.

"Dash..." she whispered, turning her paw to hold on to his. "What's wrong?"

He stared into her eyes for the longest time, the relief fading into fear and agony. His eyes bored into hers, as if desperate to tell her something but terrified to speak. He watched her for what seemed like years in silence. When she looked into his eyes, she could see desperation hiding in his guarded stare, as if he longed to tell her what was wrong.

She swallowed back the taste of fear and shivered. Lisa's words echoed in her mind, making her body grow numb with horror. *The disease is worse when it comes back...progresses much faster than the first time...worse if weakened by hunger...*

*Sometimes it is fatal.*

Her heart stopped. "Dash, get up," she whispered.

He blinked in confusion. "What?"

"Get up," she stammered, feeling her heart beat so fast she could barely feel it.

He stared back at her with pain glimmering in his amber eyes. After a long moment of hesitation, he let out a soft, defeated sigh. "I can't."

Her eyes narrowed with unease. "What do you mean you can't?"

He shifted uncomfortably and looked away from her in shame, his ears drooping and his tail slipping lifelessly to the ground. Silence spread out between them.

Saderia's eyes widened in disbelief. "This is no time for shyness, Dash! Tell me!"

Dash winced and closed his eyes, avoiding her terrified gaze. "I don't want to upset you," he whispered in a voice so low she had to strain her ears to hear his words.

She stared at him in shock. "You're sitting here in...in pain...and misery...and you're worried about me being the slightest bit upset when you're...when you're..." She trailed off in horror and felt a cold wave of

fear turn her body to ice. Tears stung her eyes like tiny icicles no matter how hard she tried to push them away.

Dash looked up slowly to meet her gaze. “Saderia?”

She gazed back at him in horror, her mind whirling with desperation. There had to be something to save Dash. There had to be a way to stop this. The trees outside would be covered with fruit if she just looked in the right place. An herb that would help him keep his strength would be growing plentifully if she just looked for the right plant. The days Dash needed to fight the disease would be given to him if she just found the right things to give him strength. There had to be *something* out there to save him. Her heart ached with desperation. “I have to go,” she choked out, yanking her paw away from his.

Dash’s eyes widened in horror. “What? No!” Before she could move, he lunged toward her and wrapped his paws around her leg, desperate to stop her. Tears streaked down his dirty cheeks as he gazed up at her with agonized amber eyes. “Please don’t go, Saderia! I don’t want to be alone! I’m dying, Saderia! I want to be with you!”

A violent shiver racked her body. Feeling her heart burn with pain, she turned away from him and tried to stop the fear rising in her chest. “I’ll find food!” she stammered. “I’ll bring some back this time! You’ll be stronger then! You’ll get better!”

Dash buried his face in the blanket. “There won’t be any food!”

She squeezed her eyes shut and took a shaky breath. “There will be this time!”

He stared up at her in disbelief. “Why do you think so?”

“Because...because there just will be.” She shook her head desperately. “Because there needs to be. It *has* to be.”

He closed his eyes and let out a soft sigh. “But it’s not. You could search every last inch of this forest and not find a thing. There’s not one bit of food left *anywhere*.”

She lashed her tail. “How do you know?”

He gestured toward the entrance leading to the woods outside. “Have you seen any on the trees? It doesn’t matter where we go. Outside our den, into the woods, on the path to the Home of the Leopards, in the woods around that neighborhood...it’s all gone.”

“Well, maybe there’s something else!” she pleaded. “There’s got to be!”

He let out a long breath and looked down at his paws. “There’s not.”

Her heart ached with pain, but she couldn’t make herself believe it was the truth. The truth couldn’t be that cruel. “Maybe Maeta’s found a cure,” she stammered.

He hung his head. “She hasn’t.”

She gritted her teeth. “How do you know?”

He flicked his tail and shrugged. “If she had, the royal family and the rulers of the forest would be the first to know.”

She shook her head desperately. “There has to be something we haven’t thought of.”

“There isn’t.” He looked up at her with sad, resigned eyes. “You’ve already thought of everything you possibly could. There are no more options left.”

“That can’t be. You can’t be...this can’t happen! You have to have *some* strength left until I can find something to help.” She blinked back tears. “Get up.”

Dash took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Gritting his teeth, he shakily placed his paws on the bed and tried to lift himself up. His paws trembled underneath him and slid across the stone when he tried to stand. Agony spread across his face as he collapsed onto the bed. Saderia slapped a paw over her mouth to keep from crying out.

Letting out a groan, Dash buried his face in his paws. “I’m a wimp,” he muttered.

Saderia winced, as if someone had stuck a knife in her heart. “Don’t say that!”

“Why? It’s the truth.” He shook his head in disgust. “I’m pathetic.”

She rested her paw firmly on his shoulder and stared down at him with burning amber eyes. “You’re not weak. You’re just sick.”

He sighed. “Easy for you to say. You’ve always been the strong one.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “Dash, you’re the only reason I’m alive. If it hadn’t been for you, I would have died a long time ago. You risked your own father’s wrath just to save me from his dungeons so long ago. You fought your own mother to protect me even after I abandoned you.

You did everything you could to keep me safe in the desert and you've helped me get used to this...despicable forest. Without you, I wouldn't be here." Her paws trembled. "Without you, I won't be able to survive."

He looked up sharply, his eyes suddenly wide with alarm. "Don't say that!"

"Why?" she muttered. "It's the truth." She let out a sigh and stared down at her paws. "Who knows what else is going to happen? A thousand different challenges could be in my future and without you, I won't be able to face a single one of them. I don't know what I would do without you. Please, Dash, I can't stand to lose another friend."

He glanced down at his paws in defeat. "I'm trying, Saderia, but it's not like I have a huge choice in the matter."

Saderia closed her eyes, trying to push back the pain in her heart. "All this time...I've just been endangering you over and over again...and I've never done anything to repay you. I just get mad at you when you're not perfect. I even get mad at you when you are perfect!" She buried her face in her paws. "I'm a horrible friend."

Dash looked up at her and gently rested a paw on her back. "That's not true," he murmured, brushing his paw comfortingly across her fur. "You're the only reason I'm alive, as well. When I was living with my Dad, I kept hoping there would be some way to help your parents. I just didn't know it would be through you. You gave me the courage to help you and get away from my Dad. The only reason I bothered to survive out in the woods afterwards was because I was inspired by your bravery. You stood up for me when you didn't even know me. You took me in even though my past was so horrible. You've done everything to 'repay' me. Taking me on adventures, inviting me into your home, being my friend... No one could ask for more than what you've done for me."

She squeezed her eyes shut. "Adventures? I've put you through horrible things."

He flicked her gently with his tail. "Not really. Come on, Saderia. Get up."

Slowly she looked up with amber eyes shining with pain and desperation. "I can't lose you," she whispered. "I can't lose you like Dingo, Dash. I just can't."



He let out a soft sigh and brushed away some of the tears glimmering on the edges of her eyes. "It will be okay..."

"No, it won't!" she interrupted, looking away. "It will never be okay."

Dash took a deep breath and looked down at his paws. "I know it's hard," he murmured, "but there's nothing you can do."

She shook her head and lifted her gaze to the ceiling. "Why? Why is it always like that? Whenever my closest friends need me the most, I'm helpless to do a thing...except sit back and watch them suffer."

Dash patted her gently with his tail. "I'm sorry, Saderia, but it's not your fault. No one could do anything at this point. No one could have saved Dingo, and so far no one has been able to save me." He wrapped his paw tightly around hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Sometimes things like this just happen without any warning or any time to prepare. Eventually something gets the best of you. No one's perfect enough to fight off everything. If you want to save me now, there's only one thing you can do."

She looked up at him and felt tears prick her eyes once again. "What?"

He gave her a sad smile. "Stay here with me. Whenever I'm around you, I feel strong and happy as if nothing bad has ever happened. Whenever I'm around you, I feel like there's hope."

A tear slipped down Saderia's face. Biting her lip, she forced herself to nod silently. "All right," she whispered. "I'll stay here with you, Dash, and I won't ever leave. Just please try to get better."

He sighed. "I'll try, Saderia. I am trying. Just let me know I have something to hope for."

Darkness covered the underground cavern, casting shadows across the outlaws. Jeb stood in the entrance to his cave den, staring out at the Spring with uncertain eyes. Outlaws sat around the Spring near the pile of fruit or lurking in the shadows. Their voices were hushed and quiet. No matter where Jeb looked, he couldn't spot Secka. His heart skipped when he wondered if he was lurking in the darkness. The thought of finding him made him feel weak with fear, but part of him longed to talk to him.

Guilt had haunted him ever since he heard about the kraguer that had been killed and his thoughts had been riddled with wonder when he

thought about where Secka might have been at the time of the attack. He had to know Secka's version of the story no matter how terrifying the thought was. If the gray outlaw was capable of doing what Jeb thought he was, then the Emperor truly was in danger, and Keruni was, too.

Shivering, Jeb cast a glance back at his parents, who sat at the back of the cave den picking at their food. After a long hesitation, he forced himself to stumble out into the center of the Spring. He looked around wildly, searching for any sign of Secka, but even when he peered into the darkest corners of the Spring, he couldn't spot him. Feeling his determination fade into fear, he turned around and padded rapidly back to his den. His heart started to beat faster and he raced toward the entrance of his den, but before he could get close, something smacked into his side and shoved him to the ground.

Jeb let out a cry of terror when strong paws shoved him down onto the freezing floor. The sound of rapid paw steps echoed through the den and Telku let out a shout of fury. He appeared in the entrance of his cave den and lunged forward, but before he could reach his son, Jeb heard a cold, bored voice above him let out a sigh.

"Cool it, scaredy-cat. He just startled me, that's all. I didn't hurt him."

Jeb laid frozen on the ground in terror, then looked up in surprise when the kraguer holding him down stepped away from him. Shaking violently in the musty air of the Spring, he stumbled to his paws and whirled around to see Secka sitting in front of him. A dark glow of amusement colored his shadowed gray eyes.

Trying to control the frantic beating of his heart, Jeb forced himself to turn to face his father. "I'm okay, Dad!" he called. "It...it was an accident, really."

Telku hesitated, giving both of them a suspicious glance before reluctantly retreating into the den. His eyes lingered on them even after he backed away.

Secka raised an eyebrow before slowly turning around to face Jeb with a bored look on his face. "Always acting so noble, Jeb, protecting your beloved father." He flexed his sharp, dirty claws in the moonlight and smirked. "When without him you'd be dead."

Jeb shivered and tried to hide the fear in his eyes. “I don’t have time for this, Secka. I wanted to talk to you. I...I have to ask you something.”

He snorted. “Am I still your trusted source of information after what’s happened?”

Jeb glanced nervously at his paws. “It’s about you.”

“How interesting.”

Jeb flattened his ears and tried not to wince at his cool words. Feeling cold and shaky, he dropped his voice to a whisper and forced himself to meet his eyes. “Secka...did...did you k-kill that kraguer? The... the one you said the creatures killed?”

Secka calmly flicked his black-tipped tail. “So what if I did? Does it matter to you, Jeb? You seem to be the only half-wit in this place to even come to that conclusion, so congratulations. Spread that around and you’ll get a plaque for your smarts—a tombstone. Now, if you don’t mind, I have things to do.”

Jeb gaped in horror as he started to turn. “What, more innocent animals to kill?”

“That doesn’t concern you.” Secka cast a dark glance back at him and coolly flicked his tail before disappearing into the shadows at the back of the cavern.

Jeb stood frozen to the spot, shaking in horror. Every hair of his body stood on end in fear and his paws felt cold and numb with terror. The creatures hadn’t killed the kraguer the way everyone else thought. Secka had murdered him in cold blood and savaged what was left of him to make it look like the creatures had done it.

A violent shiver raced through Jeb’s body. His stomach churned with sickness. Just a few months ago, he had trusted Secka enough to travel with him to Zerone’s Court. Before the creatures had come, he had depended on the gray outlaw to stand up for him to the others and help him in the Spring. All that time he had trusted a murderer.

Thinking of the eerie light he had seen in Secka’s eyes, he felt suddenly hopeless. Secka had already starved Zerone and his kraguers in addition to the creatures by hiding all of the stolen fruit in the Spring, and he had killed a kraguer just days ago. It wouldn’t be long before he went after his main target. What if the Emperor had just a few days left to live? Another shudder racked his body. He longed to find Zerone and warn him

before it was too late, but a dark voice in his head reminded him of the dead kraguer. If he dared to warn the Emperor, *he* might end up as pile of blood-soaked scraps just like the kraguer Secka had killed. If he didn't warn the Emperor, Zerone might end up the same way.

Jeb shivered. If he didn't help Zerone, Keruni would lose a father, but if he did, his parents would lose a son. What if his fears came true all because of his cowardice?

Darkness hung in the thick air of the den, casting frigid, black shadows across the stony walls. Faded streaks of light from the dying sun spread across the floor. Silence hung thickly in the air, broken only by raw, heavy panting. Dash laid splayed out on the cold, rough bed, his messy fur fluffed out in a desperate attempt to stay warm. His disheveled mane fell across the front of the bed in all directions and his weak paws laid shakily out in front of him. His messy, unkempt fur had grown so thin and sparse Saderia could see every one of his ribs jutting out of his sides. The pile of food sitting on the table outside the room had run out days ago and nights had passed by in starvation.

Agony shone in Dash's narrowed amber eyes and weakness seemed to haunt every inch of his shaky body. She could feel cold freezing his limbs, but when she leaned closer, she could sense heat seeping off of him. Sweat dripped down his face and dampened his fur even as shivers racked his body. His chest shuddered with every harsh, wheezing breath he took. His dull amber eyes focused on his paws, seeming to grow dimmer and dimmer with every painful breath he took.

Gritting her teeth, Saderia looked up and stared around the room with wide, desperate eyes. Standing in the corner close to the entrance of the den was her mother, Cia, and Uncle Jash. All three tigers had their heads bowed and their eyes focused on the ground, as if too afraid to look up and see the agony in Dash's eyes. None of them dared to speak. Turning away from their silent forms, Saderia turned to stare at the back corner of the room where a leopard sat in silence, watching them with guarded brown eyes. A basket laid at Maeta's paws, filled with nothing but a few flecks of dirt and bits of roots. All of the herbs she had brought at the King and Queen's request to try to save Dash had been used up and hadn't done a thing to help him. Only the herb she had given him to treat the pain had

worked, but its effects had worn off too fast. Everyone sat silently in the tense darkness, watching Dash struggle for his last breaths and never saying a word.

Saderia took a deep, shaky breath and desperately turned to face the leopard, feeling tears sting her eyes. “Maeta,” she pleaded. “Please, you’re supposed to be a healer. Isn’t there anything you can do?”

The leopard leader bowed her head and said nothing.

Fighting back tears, Saderia turned away from her and squeezed her eyes shut. Her heart burned with agony when she forced herself to look up and saw Dash staring up at her, his eyes dull and sad. He met her gaze and managed a weak, painful smile before reaching forward and shakily wrapping his paw around hers. A tear streaked down her face and she curled up closer to Dash, pressing her face up against his chest. Heat rolled over her even as his cold fur sent frigid chills racing down her spine.

“You can’t go,” she whispered, trying to calm the terrified beating of her heart.

Dash gently placed a paw on her back and let out a soft sigh when she looked up to meet his gaze. “I don’t think I have a choice,” he murmured.

She took another breath and tried to hide the agony in her heart. “I won’t let you.”

He smiled weakly and flicked her with his tail. “How are you going to do that?”

She shook her head and closed her eyes, tasting salty tears in the back of her throat. Every inch of her body seemed frozen with pain and a jolt of anguish shot through her and turned her blood to ice when she met Dash’s dull eyes. It felt as if a million thorns were digging into her skin every time she saw him wince with pain. Her vision blurred with tears, but she struggled to blink them away, terrified that if she looked away or closed her eyes for even a second, Dash would be gone.

She let out a trembling breath of air to try to calm the panic rising in her chest. “I love you, Dash,” she choked out. “You’re my best friend. I don’t know what to do.”

He pressed his paw softly against hers and let out a quiet, sympathetic sigh. “There’s nothing else you can do now.”

A rush of agony made every inch of her body burn as if it was on fire, forcing her to squeeze her eyes shut to conceal a cry. "Why can't I think of anything?"

"Because there's nothing to think of." He gently rubbed her paw and managed a sad smile. "There's no food on the trees and none in the house. There are no herbs growing in the forest. You know that." Pain flashed in his eyes when he slowly lifted his weak paw, but he ignored the agony and pressed his trembling paw against her face. She slowly opened her eyes and met his determined amber gaze. "This is not your fault," he whispered. "I know you want to help me, but you can't without anything to save me. No one can. Anyone could be in my position and it wouldn't be anyone's fault. No one could have predicted this and no one could have stopped this."

Tears glimmered in her eyes. "I wish I could have done something earlier. I wish we would have kept more food or done *something* to help you."

He let his paw drop back down to the bed. "Sometimes wishing isn't enough."

She bowed her head and bit back a sob. "Dash, I don't want you to die."

"And I don't want to leave you behind," he murmured. "We can't control everything, Saderia. We've done our best to stay together. Every moment we've spent together long before this happened has been wonderful. We might not get to be together, but the things we've done have made up for a lifetime. The friendship we've shared and the life you gave me means more to me than seeing another day. I don't have anything to regret or wish for. I've already gotten everything I could have ever wanted."

Tears streaked down her cheeks. "I don't want you to go."

He squeezed her paw. "I know, Saderia, but I've got no choice. You've got your family here to take care of you and they've got you to take care of them. The forest animals outside this den will be there for you and they'll need you for whatever might happen next. I don't know anyone stronger than you. You'll be fine."

She shook her head miserably. "You're wrong. I'll never be fine after this."

"Yes, you will." Dash looked up to meet her gaze and his eyes suddenly darkened with seriousness. Holding her paw tighter, he took a

long, deep breath and slowly let it out. "I just need you to promise me one thing."

Her voice was barely above a whisper. "What's that?"

He squeezed her paw tightly with every bit of strength he had left. "I need you to promise me that no matter what happens now or in the future, you'll never give up and you'll keep going. I need you to promise me that this won't destroy you. You'll still be strong and brave and kind and do everything you can to help those around you just like you always have." His eyes gleamed in the dim light. "Promise me."

Blinking tears out of her eyes, Saderia took a deep, shaky breath and nodded weakly. "Fine," she whispered. "If that's what I can do to make you happy, then fine. I promise. I just don't know where I'll find the strength to keep that promise."

He gave her a weak smile. "You're always strong. You just have to realize that for yourself." He flicked her with his tail and his eyes shone in the darkness. "Thank you."

Saderia nodded shakily and tried to force back the tears burning her eyes. Her heart was pounding so rapidly it felt as if it was going to burst, but she could barely feel it beating. All she could feel was a dagger digging into her chest, sending pain coursing through her body every time she dared to breathe.

Dash smiled and leaned against the bed, his hoarse breath trailing away. His eyes grew duller and the faint glimmer of life shining in their amber depths became fainter and fainter. His chest fell still, then shuddered with a weak, rasping breath. Letting out a sigh, he slumped back against the bed and shuddered as he struggled to take in another breath. His eyes rolled up to the ceiling, seeming to stare through the hard stone at nothing at all.

Saderia stared down at him, her heart beating in the same erratic rhythm she could feel pulsing in his paw. Her breath shuddered out of her chest in short, raspy pants the same way his did and her paws grew cold and icy to the touch. Agony worse than any pain she had ever experienced spread to every inch of her body. She could almost hear herself screaming even though she wasn't making a sound.

Behind her, the dusty yellow light faded out of the den as the sun slipped down below the horizon, covering the den in blackness. Saderia's heart slammed in her chest and sweat dripped down her freezing face. The

faint glow in Dash's wide, distant eyes grew dimmer and dimmer as the last few rays of sunlight faded out of view. Her darkest hour had come. Somewhere on the horizon there had to be a light that would bring them warmth. Somewhere there had to be hope. Somehow she had to fight back no matter how bleak the situation or how strong the obstacles. Somehow she had to change the future.

Gritting her teeth, she blinked away the tears and steadied her frantic heartbeat. Without pausing to look at Dash, she leapt to her paws and lunged off the bed. He let out a stunned cry behind her and rolled around to look at her in shock. His stunned amber eyes bored into her back, but she forced herself to not turn and look at him. Seeing the pain and desperation in his eyes would destroy the tiny bit of determination she had.

"Saderia!" he gasped. "What are you doing?"

She took a deep breath and turned to face the entrance of the room. "I have to go."

In the corner closest to the entrance, Karenisha looked up in shock. "Saderia! What are you talking about?"

She could see the stunned, frightened eyes of her aunt and uncle out of the corner of her eye, but she ignored their looks of surprise. Behind her, she felt Dash's eyes burning into her back and heard him let out a soft gasp. "Go? But...but I need you!"

Pain exploded in her chest when she heard the betrayal tainting his terrified words, but she forced herself not to look back. "I'll be back," she hissed. "In time."

"Saderia, stop this!" Karenisha shouted. Her mother took a step toward her, but before she could reach out to pull her back, Saderia lunged away from her.

Without giving herself the chance to look back, she raced out of the den as fast as she could, feeling her sore paws slam onto the hard stone. Freezing air blasted her in the face the instant she stepped outside, but the only thing she could feel was the searing heat of determination burning in her blood. Gritting her teeth, she lunged into the woods, ducking under tall trees and ignoring the dense undergrowth pushing her back. Her eyes pierced through the darkness, scanning the woods for any hint as to what to do. She felt her heart speed up with disgust when she thought about what she had done, but she forced herself to push it away. Dash had only minutes



left to live. She had to focus and think of *something* or else her last chance to see him had been lost when she had left him behind.

The trees around her were completely bare. There wasn't a hint of food left in the forest, but it had to have gone somewhere and she intended to find out where. No one in the forest had any food left to spare and no one was going to help her. Nothing in the forest was going to point her in the right direction. Her last hope rested in herself.

Closing her eyes, she lifted her head and let out a long breath. The darkness faded around her and her body felt light as fear left her. Taking in a deep breath, she let the pain and worry drain away and felt her whole body grow light as if she was drifting up into the sky. Breathing hard without feeling a single breath, she let out a soft gasp. "I believe! I believe in Dreams and prophecies and ghosts and magic and miracles! Do you hear that, Claw? Do you hear that, Queen Tarae? I've lost so many of my friends and myself and I'm about to lose the last friend and the last piece of myself I have left. I know I'm strong enough to figure this out and save him if I use every bit of strength and knowledge I have left, but unless I use every gift I have, I have no chance. Dash needs me *now*. I need Dreams, I need prophecies, I need something to lead me! I believe!"

Her eyes blinked open and her breath suddenly rushed through her, placing her feet firmly back on the ground. The darkness seemed to recede, and when she looked down, she saw a faint, golden glow shimmering around her paws. Looking up, she felt her senses return to her with a rush of determination. Scanning the woods wildly, she froze when she felt a sharp, familiar tug come from a wild patch of woods. Without stopping to think, she lunged toward the bushes, feeling her paws slam against the ground. The tug leading her forward felt like a rope yanking her toward her last hope to save Dash.

The woods blurred around her in a dark array of colors. Twisting and turning in every direction, she ran as fast as she could, leaving the familiar part of the woods far behind her. Branches tore at her fur, splattering her face with droplets of blood. Weeds wrapped around her legs to drag her down and thorns dug into her paws and her sides, but she ignored the pain. The frantic pounding of her heart drowned out the stinging pain the faster she ran and the stronger the pull got. Every beat was another second ticking by. She narrowed her eyes and ran faster, leaving behind a

trail of bloody paw prints. Food was waiting for her somewhere within the woods. She couldn't be too late.

Pushing through a thick patch of undergrowth, she felt the tug pulling her forward give a sharp yank and force her to stumble into a tiny clearing. Skidding to a halt, she looked around wildly when she no longer felt a tug urging her to follow a certain direction. Sweat dripped down her face as she scanned the clearing desperately, searching for the reason she had been brought there. Glancing toward a dense clump of bushes on the edge of the clearing, she felt her eyes widen and a jolt of shock race through her body.

A jagged, tiny hole was carved into the ground, almost completely hidden behind the wild bushes growing around it. Darkness covered the small slit, making it impossible to see what was inside. Taking a step forward, Saderia stared down into the hole. A fifty-foot fall might stretch out between her and the bottom. A thousand snakes or other sinister creatures could be lurking down there, eager for unsuspecting prey. Her death could be waiting to welcome her if she took one more step. If that was the case, so be it.

Narrowing her eyes, Saderia dug her claws into the earth and lunged into the dark hole. Her paws twisted in nothing but pure darkness and a rush of air breezed past her moments before she hit the ground. Hard rock and sharp stones slammed into her when she smacked against the cold rock. The sharp sound of her painful thud echoed in the blackness around her, sending chills down her spine. Wincing and hiding a groan of pain, she slowly looked up and froze in shock when her eyes pierced through the darkness.

Sitting in the center of the damp cavern was a huge, towering pile of food. Behind it, two wide eyes glowed through the darkness, one blue and one green.

# Chapter Twenty-One

## New Friend

A jolt of fear raced down Saderia's spine as she stared into the eerie, multicolor eyes shining through the blackness. Terror lit up the wide blue and green irises of the creature hiding in the darkness. The tiny sound of claws scrabbling on the stone whispered through the silent cavern. The creature never blinked. Narrowing her eyes, Saderia stared coldly back at the creature. Glancing down at the huge pile of fruit, she tore her gaze away from the strange eyes and dove down to pick up as much food as she could. If the creature wanted to attack her, let it. Nothing was going to stop her from going back to Dash.

Looking up, she met the eerie blue and green eyes before whipping around and lunging toward the hole in the ceiling. The eyes burned into her back as she struggled to climb up. Reaching up, she hauled herself out of the cavern into the dark forest. Jumping to her paws, she looked around wildly, searching for the way back. A familiar tug came from her right. Narrowing her eyes, she darted toward it as fast as she could, her heart pounding with the hope that she could save Dash and the fear that she might be too late. Leaves smacked her face, but she ignored it and let the woods fade to a blur. Running frantically, she chased her instinct, searching for any sign of her dark den.

Jumping into a tiny clearing, she skidded to a halt when the instinct died away, as if commanding her to stop. Trying to suppress her heavy panting, she looked around wildly for any sign of her den. Panic burned in her chest when she realized she couldn't recognize any of the dark, sinister trees. Turning around in a circle, she paused when her eyes flicked to a tiny, weak-looking plant peeking up from underneath the grass and instantly felt a powerful feeling tug her forward. Frowning, she pushed back the grass to get a closer look. A small light blue plant that looked like a leaf grew up and curled over itself in a swirl. Fuzzy white dandelion-like fluff powdered the plant from top to bottom.

A jolt of realization shot through Saderia's body. Reaching forward, she tugged the crinkly plant up out of the ground, revealing shiny silver roots. Without another thought, she whirled around and darted off into the woods, letting her paws carry her back to her home. Ignoring the blood dripping from her wounds, she burst into a familiar clearing. Her heart beat wildly as she darted into her house. Rushing across the rocky floor of the den, she leapt past the jagged hole that marked the entrance of her room.

"Saderia!" Karenisha looked up from where she stood in the corner and gasped in shock. Beside her, Cia and Uncle Jash gaped in surprise, their blue eyes growing wide.

From across the room, Maeta looked up and gaped in incredulity. Her brown eyes widened when her gaze flicked down to the food Saderia held. "What? Food?"

Saderia barely noticed them as she looked shakily up at the bed, trying to control the harsh pants shuddering out of her chest. Dash laid weakly on the bed with his back turned to her and his tail hanging limply off the edge. His ears drooped and the dirty fur sticking up on his gaunt body remained eerily still. Her heart skipped a beat. "Dash?"

Relief washed over her when his ears pricked up. Trembling with exhaustion, Dash slowly rolled around to look out with dull eyes almost completely empty of life. Amazement and hope lit up his faint amber eyes when his gaze fell on her. "Saderia?"

Blinking back tears of relief, she lunged onto the bed beside him. "You're alive!"

He weakly reached forward and pressed his paw against hers before looking up at her with sad, blurry eyes. "I wouldn't die without another chance to see you, Saderia."

Tears stung her eyes and a bright smile spread across her face. "You're not going to die, Dash. Look." She held up the fruit and pushed it toward him with shaky paws.

Dash's eyes widened in disbelief and he lifted his head in shock, as if unable to believe what he was seeing. "What?" he gasped. "Wh-where did you find this?"

She flicked her tail sharply. "I'll explain later. Right now, just eat as much of it as you possibly can to get your strength back before it's too late."

Dash blinked up at her in surprise, then nodded and slowly leaned forward to nibble on the fruit. A faint light crept back into his faded eyes.

Reaching forward, she pulled out the strange blue plant she had stuffed in the pile of food. “As soon as you get your strength back, eat this, too,” she said. “This will help.”

Dash looked up at it, his eyes gleaming with interest and wonder. “What is it?”

She met his gaze, feeling a tingle of certainty. “It’s the cure for the disease.”

Maeta’s eyes widened in disbelief. “*What?!* How could you possibly know that?”

Saderia slowly met her stunned gaze with glowing eyes. “I’m sorry, but that’s a royal family secret.” Dash looked up in surprise, then smiled a knowing smile. “You can call it magic. All I can tell you is that I know it for sure. You just have to believe me.”

Maeta gaped at her in shock. “But...but it hasn’t been tested and...”

“It doesn’t have to be.” Dash weakly raised his head to glance over at Maeta, then smiled up at Saderia. “She knows what she’s talking about. Trust me.”

Behind them, Karenisha blinked several times, then managed a weak smile. “I think Dash is right. Maeta, take a good look at that plant so you know what to look for.”

Maeta gaped in disbelief. “You’re actually comfortable testing this on your son?”

Dash shrugged. “It’s not like I have anything to lose.”

Maeta hesitated before stepping forward to study the plant, her eyes narrowed in unease. “I’ve never seen this plant anywhere in this forest. Where did you find this?”

Saderia shrugged. “I found it in the woods in the area to the left of the den.”

Maeta frowned. “I’ve looked there and I’ve never found anything like this. This is the first I’ve ever seen.” She inspected the herb. “It still looks young, so maybe they’re only starting to grow. It could be their season.” She hesitated before handing the plant back to Dash. “Normally I would never trust an herb without testing it, but...I will trust you.”

Saderia nodded and watched Dash as he cautiously took the plant. Her breath caught in her throat when he carefully held it up to look at it. After a long hesitation, he took a deep breath and tentatively took a bite out of the strange herb. Curling his lip, he chewed it up before opening his eyes and looking around at all the animals staring at him.

He glanced up at Saderia. A slight smile spread across his face as the color slowly returned to his eyes. "It tastes weird, but not bad. I...I feel a little stronger actually."

A hopeful smile spread across Saderia's face. "That's great," she whispered.

Dash's eyes shone with hope and excitement. "I think I'm going to be okay."

Relief crashed over Saderia, making tears sting her eyes. Diving forward, she buried her face in Dash's chest and closed her eyes, her tail curling up with happiness.

"It's a miracle," Maeta murmured, watching them in amazement.

Pressing closer to her best friend, Saderia just smiled. After months of not believing in her Dreams, she almost couldn't speak through the joy in her heart. Ever since she had failed to save Dingo, she hadn't been able to trust her instinct. After going through life without the comfort of believing in her own decisions, the relief of being able to trust herself again made her feel almost faint. Maybe she had been powerless to save Dingo, but now she knew she was strong enough to go on with her life and help her best friend. She had done it. She had actually changed the future and saved her best friend. No matter how many mistakes she had made, she knew she was finally strong enough to accept them. She knew she could face the world now that she had saved Dash.

Miracle or not, he was going to be okay. Her senses were sure of it.

The creature hadn't killed him.

Jeb stood in the entrance to his cave den, staring out at the basin with wide, stunned eyes. Just the other day, he had stood on the other side of the spring staring into the wide eyes of an enormous creature. Surrounded by darkness, Jeb had sat near the edge of the basin, looking down at the fruit piled in the empty crater. For hours he had debated leaving the Spring. He could still remember feeling cold with fear at the thought of

coming face to face with Secka if he tried to sneak out. The Spring had been completely silent and still. Every outlaw had been tucked safely inside their dens, deeply asleep. His parents had fallen asleep hours ago when he had snuck out to stand beside the spring.

Jeb had frowned when a sudden dark shadow blocked the moonlight shining down through the hole in the ceiling. A second later, a monstrous orange and black-striped creature had leapt into his Spring. His heart had froze and his paws had scrabbled frantically against the stone, but he hadn't been able to run. Petrified with fear, he had stared at the creature. Slowly it had looked up and its wide, glowing amber eyes met his.

The creature's gleaming eyes had turned him to stone. Jeb hadn't dared to breathe, terrified it would attack. Thoughts of the creature attacking with blood-soaked fangs had flicked through his mind. Every millisecond that had ticked by had seemed like his last. Any moment he thought the creature would lunge at him and kill him. But it didn't.

All the creature had done was step forward, grab several pieces of fruit, and jump back up into the upper world, giving Jeb half a second to realize how skinny it looked. Even once it left, he had remained frozen for hours, petrified with shock and wonder.

The creature hadn't killed him. It was just hungry.

After what felt like years, Jeb had finally staggered back to his cave den. Hours had passed by before the fear finally faded away and the shivering stopped. When he had finally calmed down, he couldn't help but feel a sense of wonder and admiration. Even now, Jeb could picture the determination glowing in the creature's bright amber eyes. The monsters he had imagined were cruel and soulless. The emotions he had read in the creature's glinting eyes seemed to prove they weren't as cruel as he had once thought.

Hours later, he remained standing in the entrance of his den, thinking about what had happened. A few outlaws sat around the Spring, not noticing anything unusual. None of them had seen the creature and Jeb had kept quiet about it. Even if he told them, none of them would believe him. He hadn't even dared to tell his parents for fear of how they might react. The secret laid with him. He knew the creatures were nothing like they had been made out to be. The creature could have killed him last night.

Instead it had taken food to survive. The truly evil animals lived down in the Spring with him—his own kind.

Narrowing his eyes in sudden determination, he stalked out into the dark Spring. Without bothering to think, he raced toward the basin and leapt to the other side. He felt a rush of excitement and freedom when he realized he no longer had to fear the creatures; the creature he had seen had proved that. Without anything to fear about the upper world, he could easily race to Zerone's Court to warn him. Bunching his muscles, he leapt toward the hole in the ceiling, eager to warn Zerone before it was too late.

Jeb raced through the black forest. Ignoring the cold wind, he darted through the shadows, not bothering to hide. Panting, he raced toward Zerone's Court, hoping the Emperor would give him a chance to speak. He felt at ease. The creatures no longer posed a threat, and in his relief, he had forgotten about the one animal that did. A soft rustling noise suddenly sounded from one of the bushes, making Jeb look back with a frown. A flash of gray shot out of the undergrowth. Jeb's eyes widened in shock and he had just enough time to see claws flash before the animal shoved him to the ground. The breath left Jeb's throat. Rough paws dug into his shoulders, pushing his belly into the dirt. Jeb struggled desperately to get free, then froze when he heard a low, familiar growl above him.

"What in the world are you doing up here, scaredy-cat?"

Jeb froze, feeling his blood run cold. Secka let out another dark growl, making him shiver in fear. He laid still in dismay, not knowing what to do. Somehow he hoped Secka would let him up...but the gray outlaw knew what it meant to see Jeb on the surface world.

"Oh, getting braver on me, are you?" Secka curled his lip and dug his claws into Jeb's back, making his eyes water with pain. "Well, you're going to pay for that. I wonder what you're doing out here, Jeb...maybe going to warn your old buddy Zerone?"

Jeb shivered and rapidly shook his head. "No, no, nothing like that!"

Secka snorted. "What else would a coward like you be doing up here? Taking a midnight stroll?" He let out a mocking snicker. "Haven't you heard? It's dangerous up here. There are evil creatures that eat little babies like you. Those things killed one of us!"

Jeb gritted his teeth and tried not to cry out in fear. "That was you!"



He shrugged. "Details, details."

"Let me up!" Jeb whimpered, feeling a wave of pain and terror wash over him. "I'll go home and never come up again, I swear! You won't have to worry..."

"No, I don't think I'll do that." Secka raised an eyebrow. "I have a hunch here. Now correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think your precious father is around here."

Jeb's eyes widened in alarm and he frantically shook his head. "No, he's here!" he squeaked. "You know my Dad—he would never let me out alone!"

"Yes, Telku can be a bit of a worrywart," Secka muttered, lifting a paw and flexing his claws. "But remember that time when you and I snuck out to pay a visit to our good friend Zerone? I think I corrupted you, Jeb. I think you like sneaking out now. So who's to say Telku even knows you're gone? Until next morning, of course, when he realizes you aren't coming back," he added with a nonchalant flick of his tail.

A jolt of terror shot through Jeb. Before he could think, he desperately kicked and struggled to get away, but the gray outlaw dug his claws into his paw and raked his claws across the back of Jeb's head. Jeb let out a shriek of agony and struggled frantically, feeling tears sting his eyes. Sticky blood trickled from the cuts, oozing through his fur.

The gray outlaw let out a heavy, annoyed sigh. "I hate murder. It's so messy."

Jeb gaped in disbelief. "Then why are you trying to kill Zerone?"

"I like the prospect of him being dead. I just don't like having to do the work. But for him I suppose it can't be helped." His eerie gray eyes suddenly gleamed in the moonlight. "Now for you, I do have an idea to spare the huge mess. Cleaning blood off my claws can be a bit boring, so I think I'll just throw you down some hole and wait for nature to do its duty. One that's well-hidden, so that pesky Telku can't find you."

Jeb's eyes widened in terror. "You're going to throw me in a pitfall?!"

"And wait for you to starve to death," Secka finished. He frowned when Jeb whimpered and rolled his eyes. "Oh, stop shaking already. Starving might be a long and painful process, but it's not monsters tearing you apart like you've been imagining."

Before Jeb could protest, Secka dragged him across the cold grass. Jeb let out a cry of pain and struggled desperately to get away, but every time he tried to fight, Secka's claws dug deeper into his leg. Yanking him forward, Secka dragged him past a labyrinth of trees, then suddenly slammed him up against the side of an oak. Wincing in pain, Jeb stared at the bushes springing up around the base of the tree. His eyes widened in horror when Secka pushed them aside to reveal a dark hole dug into the empty hollow of the tree.

Secka snickered. "Well-hidden, huh?" Sneering, he shoved him toward it.

Jeb's eyes grew wide with horror. Letting out a shriek, he tumbled into the dark pitfall and disappeared into a world of blackness. Air whipped past him, rustling his fur and sending terror racing to every inch of his body. A scream ripped out of his throat as he twisted and turned, seeing nothing but darkness all around him.

He reached out desperately for the wall, but couldn't reach it. His breath left his throat when he smacked against the cold, rough ground. Pain shot to every inch of his body as he crumpled on the dirt. Blood trickled past his face and sharp stones dug into his stinging side. His eyes remained wide with terror and he didn't dare move, terrified that his burning legs would collapse. Shaking and feeling tears streak down his face, he slowly lifted his head to look up and shivered. A silver glow lit up the area above him, but the moonlight didn't shine brightly enough to reach him in the deep, dank pitfall.

Secka's face appeared in the eerie glow. "Don't bother screaming for help. You're too far down and the tree covers your voice. No one can hear you." He sneered. "Think of it this way. When you're dead, you'll never be afraid." With a last cruel snicker, Secka vanished from sight. His cold laughter slowly faded away into the distance.

Shaking with fear, Jeb staggered to his paws and looked around wildly, trying to ignore the searing pain in his limbs. Was this it? Was he really going to die? Feeling his heart pound with panic, he let out a desperate call. "Dad! Mom! Help! I'm down here!"

Silence was the only response.

“Karenisha, you need to eat.” Saderia looked up at the sound of Cia’s stern voice to see her aunt standing beside the stony table. Across from Cia on the opposite end of the table sat Uncle Jash, looking uneasily down at his paws. Karenisha sat a few paces away from the table, her gaze focused on the ground. Dark bags hung under her dull eyes and her unkempt fur hung limply off her body. Tiredness and defeat haunted her lifeless gaze.

Saderia’s eyes darted toward the large pile of food sitting on the table. Several days had passed since she had found the eerie cavern and saved Dash. With plenty of food to eat, he had already recovered his strength. His paws no longer trembled when he tried to stand. The bruises he had gotten from stumbling had begun to fade. When she brushed her paw against his, he no longer felt cold. His ribs had faded out of sight now that he was well-fed. He looked much better, but sometimes all that mattered to Saderia was looking into his eyes and seeing his amber irises gleaming brightly with life and happiness.

Creepy memories of the underground cavern haunted her mind. She hadn’t dared tell anybody about its location or return to investigate, but she couldn’t help but think about the strange place. She vaguely remembered her mother mentioning an underground spring when she and Dash had first arrived in the forest. Her mother had told her the spring had suddenly dried up after they had used it to get water. When she pictured the underground place her mother had described, the cavern fit the description perfectly.

The eerie blue and green eyes she had seen at the back of the cavern nagged at her mind. Weeks ago, Dash had wondered if the forest was abandoned. Thinking of how the spring had been drained without warning, she wondered if he had been onto something.

Days ago, she had led Maeta and a group of healers to a tiny clearing hidden deep in the woods where the curative herb grew. Pieces of the plants had been divided up between the healers to give to their sick. News had reached the royal family a day ago that the sickness had been destroyed. By the end of the day, the fortress was abandoned.

Blinking out of her thoughts, Saderia exchanged a glance with Dash. She stood next to him in the entrance to their room, staring out into the main room with wide eyes.

Cia frowned at her sister, holding out an apple. "Karenisha, you need to eat," she repeated. "We have plenty of food now. We might as well take advantage of it."

Karenisha shook her head and pushed the apple away. Her dull amber eyes grew distant as she stared down at her paws. "I can't," she murmured. "He's dead."

Uncle Jash winced, while Cia narrowed her eyes. "Karenisha, we've been through this," she hissed. "You don't know that Makero's...dead."

Karenisha looked up and gazed absently out into the woods. "Yes, I do."

Cia narrowed her eyes. "No, you don't."

"I do," she repeated in a quiet, distant murmur.

Cia raised an eyebrow. "How do you know for sure?"

Darkness clouded Karenisha's dull gaze. "I saw it," she whispered.

Cia slapped the table and let out a hiss. "Karenisha, you're unreasonable!"

Karenisha's eyes stared lifelessly out into the distance. "Hunters got him."

Cia's eyes narrowed with fury. "Hunters got me, too," she snapped, gesturing toward a scar that skimmed the bottom of her belly. "I lived."

Karenisha heaved a heavy sigh. "You had us to help you."

Cia lashed her tail. "Makero will be able to get away if his life really depends on it. Look, Karenisha, I was shot and I lived."

Karenisha's clouded eyes grew dull. "It was close-range."

Cia's face drained of color. "It was the same with me."

A shudder raced through the Queen's body. "No. Closer."

Cia let out an infuriated hiss. "Karenisha, enough! Why can't you see reason?"

Karenisha shook her head absently. "I saw," she murmured.

Cia opened her mouth to snap at her, then heaved a long, exhausted sigh. "Just eat your apple. We'll talk about this later." When the Queen didn't respond, Cia took a deep breath, rubbed her forehead, and stalked away. She stormed toward the entrance of the den, then froze when she spotted Saderia and Dash staring at her with wide, stunned eyes.

"Saderia? Dash?" She fidgeted uneasily. "How long have you two been there?"

Saderia frowned. "Is Mom okay?" she demanded, ignoring Cia's question.

Cia sighed uncomfortably. "Er...she'll see reason eventually. Um..." She paused. "I hate to ask this, but...Saderia, have you had any... Dreams...about your father?"

Saderia narrowed her eyes. "No. I don't need them to tell me he's all right."

Cia hesitated. "Well...I believe you, Saderia...but even I have to admit it worries me that he's not back yet. It's been about a week and four days since the day he left..."

Saderia sharply flicked her tail. "He's fine. Mom's starting to worry me, though."

Cia sighed. "I trust you. As for your mom...I'll take care of her."

Saderia glanced at her mother and felt a tingle of worry. The Queen's listless gaze stared straight past them. Darkness and pain clouded her eyes and her shoulders sagged in defeat. Whenever Saderia left her room, she saw her mother lying miserably on her bed. She barely spoke anymore. Her thoughts lingered on something Saderia couldn't see.

Shaking the thoughts out of her head, she looked down at her paws. "If you say so." She glanced at the woods and felt her heart skip when eerie memories flooded her mind. Her paws itched to investigate the cavern to find out what was down there and why the food had wound up at the bottom of that hole. "Cia...if you're sure Mom's going to be okay...can Dash and I go out to explore a bit? I promise I'll watch out for him."

Cia nodded absently. "Sure. Jash and I can handle things here."

Saderia managed a slight smile. "Thanks, Cia." Casting one last glance back at her mother, she brushed up against Dash and led him to the entrance of the den. Tearing her gaze off the Queen, she ducked into the labyrinth of trees and bushes.

Glancing back, Saderia shivered with worry. "Do you think she'll be okay?"

Dash looked down with a soft sigh. "I don't know. I remember you telling me about that Dream she had a day or so after I recovered. It must have really scared her." He narrowed his eyes. "You don't think there's any truth to it, do you?"

Saderia glanced down at her paws. “I...I don’t know. I don’t think so, but now that I believe in Dreams again...” She heaved a long sigh. “I suppose it’s not as easy to pass it off as a lie. Still...I haven’t Dreamed since I got my Dream sense back. If something *had* happened to Dad, I probably would have sensed *something* about it.”

“What *do* you sense about it?” he asked, glancing up at her curiously.

She frowned, focusing her thoughts on her father. A familiar pang of worry stirred in her chest, but a tense feeling of calm drowned out the panic. It was as if her instinct was telling her to wait and warning her at the same time. “I’m...not sure what I sense. I feel worried...but also calm like my Dream sense is telling me to not panic...yet.”

Dash frowned in confusion. “That’s...strange.” He studied her curiously, then blinked and shook his head in bewilderment. “Where exactly are we going anyway?”

She took a deep breath. “Remember that underground cavern I told you about where I found the food? I want to investigate it more and find out what’s down there.”

Dash’s eyes gleamed with unease. “What did you see down there again?”

“Two eyes—one blue, one green.” Saderia hesitated, feeling a shiver race down her spine. “Remember that time when you wondered if this forest really was abandoned?”

Dash’s eyes widened in surprise. “You think something lives down there? Something strange and different like the dingoes?”

Saderia nodded. “Yes, I really do think something is down there. I don’t know what it is...but it could be just as strange as the dingoes were when we first saw them.”

Dash glanced uncomfortably down at his paws. “Are you sure this is safe?”

Saderia shrugged. “It may or may not be. Whatever was down there, it didn’t try to attack me, so I guess it’s not too dangerous. It seemed almost afraid of me actually.”

“Well, in its defense, you can be kind of scary sometimes.”

Saderia grinned when she saw his playful smile. Melting back into seriousness, she heaved a sigh. “All the same, I guess we should be more

careful when we get there.”

Dash nodded with a more serious, uncertain expression. Winding around a clump of vibrant undergrowth, Saderia padded deeper into the woods. The wild, tall grass beneath her tickled her belly. Avoiding thorny weeds creeping along the overgrown forest floor, she staggered into a tiny clearing. Her eyes lit up with recognition as she led Dash toward the dense bushes at the back of the clearing. He blinked in surprise when she pushed back the bushes and uncovered the dark hole leading to the underground cavern.

“That’s where I found the food and saw the eyes,” she murmured.

He blinked in amazement. “I never would have found this on my own.”

“My Dream sense brought me to it,” she murmured. “Although Mom told us something about an underground spring she found...the one that was mysteriously drained after the forest animals started using it. I think this is it.”

Dash looked up at her in surprise. “You think there’s something living in a place the other forest animals knew about all along?”

She nodded. “It would explain why the water was drained out of the spring.”

Dash glanced uneasily into the darkness of the cave. “Should we go in?”

Saderia opened her mouth to reply, then froze. A tiny, almost inaudible cry sounded somewhere close by. Pricking her ears, she scanned the clearing, searching for the source of the whimper. Dash’s surprised eyes burned into her skin. Turning around, she frowned when a faint tug pulled her in a different direction, luring her forward.

“Saderia?” She whirled around at the sound of Dash’s voice and saw him watching her with eyes narrowed in confusion. “What’s wrong?”

She glanced back over her shoulder and frowned when her instinct pulled her forward. “I don’t know,” she murmured. “Did you hear something?”

Dash blinked in surprise. “Just now? No. Did you?”

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “Come on,” she hissed. “I want to check something.”

Dash blinked in bewilderment, but padded after her when she took a cautious step in the direction her Dream sense pointed her in. Leaving the dark hole behind, Saderia scanned the undergrowth for the source of the noise. Padding forward, she paused when she saw a huge oak tree rise up in a small clearing. Thick brown roots radiated from the oak and dark bushes sprang up around the base of the tree. Climbing over the roots, she reached forward to part the bushes. Her breath caught in her throat when she uncovered a hollow at the base of the tree and a long pitfall concealed inside it, directly under the tree.

Dash frowned when he peered inside the hollow. "That's...well hidden."

Saderia narrowed her eyes. "A little too hidden." Leaning forward, she peered down into the deep, impenetrable black depths of the hole. She leapt back with a yelp of shock when a loud, desperate cry rose from the bottom of the pitfall.

"Help! I'm down here! Dad! Mom!"

A shiver of incredulity raced down Saderia's spine. She and Dash gaped at the hole in shock, their eyes wide and stunned. After exchanging a long, uneasy glance, Saderia crept forward and peered into the hole. "Hello?" she called. "Who's down there?"

An alarmed squeak echoed in the dark depths. "Who...who are you?"

"Princess Saderia!" she called, knowing the animal would recognize her name.

"P-Princess?" Bafflement tinged the animal's voice. "What does that mean?"

She blinked in shock. Every animal knew the names of the royal family and their titles. How could the animal not know her? A shiver raced up her spine. If the animal didn't recognize the title...did that mean it wasn't a forest animal at all? Before she could respond, the shaky voice let out a whimper. "Are you one of those strange creatures?"

A tingle of fear shot up her spine at the creature's strange words. She frowned nervously down into the dark depths of the hole. "What do you mean by that?"

A terrified squeak rose up from the pitfall. "If you don't know what I mean, that must mean you *are* one! Everybody knows what it means!"



Saderia narrowed her eyes and tried to squint down into the hole even though it was impossible to see through the blackness. “What *are* you?” she called.

A soft whimper followed her words. “What are *you*?”

“I...I’m a tiger,” she stammered, feeling a bit ridiculous.

“What’s a tiger?”

A cold chill spread through her body. Every animal knew what a tiger was. Even the dingoes had known. She took a deep breath. “Are you... dangerous?”

A slight hesitation followed before the creature gave a shaky reply. “I...I don’t think so. But...you must be one of those creatures! Are...are you g-going to eat me?”

“What? No, of course not!” She paused and felt a tingle of guilt when she realized it was cruel to leave the animal trapped...whatever it was. Glancing back at Dash, she took a deep breath. “Listen, if you’re not dangerous, we’ll help you out and talk later.”

A gasp echoed from the hole. “Really? I’ve been stuck down here for days!”

“We’ll get you out in a minute!” Glancing away, she turned to Dash. “I think I saw some vines on the way here. They *might* be strong enough to help him out.”

He glanced back and nodded. “You’re right. I’ll go find one. You stay here.”

She nodded and followed him with her eyes as he leapt off the roots and darted back in the direction they had come, vanishing behind a clump of undergrowth.

A fearful whimper floated up to her ears from inside the hollow. “We?”

“My friend is here, too,” she called, leaning against the tree. “He’s a lion and you don’t have to worry about him. He won’t hurt you...as long as you don’t attack first.”

“I...I won’t!” the creature stammered.

Saderia didn’t respond. Peering into the hole, she wondered what kind of animal could be trapped down there. Part of her burned with curiosity to find out, but another part felt cold with fear. She blinked out of

her thoughts when rapid paw steps sounded from the woods. Seconds later Dash leapt into the clearing, carrying a long vine.

Her eyes lit up and she glanced back at the hole. "We've got a vine! Hold on!" Leaning forward, she grabbed the vine and lowered it into the pitfall. She dangled it downward until all but a few inches had disappeared into the blackness. The vine dipped down with a tiny tug and she couldn't tell if the creature had grabbed the vine or not. No real weight pulled the vine downward. She frowned. "Have you grabbed the vine?"

The creature's timid, smothered squeak rose up in the air. "Yes!"

Saderia blinked in surprise and shared a stunned glance with Dash. After a hesitation, they slowly turned and pulled the vine upward. With every tug of the vine, she expected to feel some weight, but it remained light. A frown spread across her face. What kind of creature weighed almost nothing at all? Pushing her worries away, she tugged the vine up until a yellow face finally appeared over the edge of the hole. Giving the vine one final tug, Saderia and Dash pulled the creature up out of the hole and hauled it onto the grass. Tossing the vine to the side, Saderia looked up and froze in shock and disbelief.

A strange creature sat hunched over in front of them, quivering in terror. When it shakily looked up at them, it was so small its head only reached their chests. Bright, vibrant yellow fur covered its body except for its two pitch black ears. Small black stripes lined its plump back and curled around its face. The tip of its short yellow tail ended in a light brown tuft of fur. Slippery, translucent green webbing stretched out between its furry yellow toes. Blinking in disbelief, she slowly looked up at its face and felt her eyes widen in shock. Two eyes stared up into her face, one a light blue and the other a shiny green. She stared at the strange creature in shock for what felt like hours. What was it?

Struggling to find her voice, she choked out, "Are...are you okay?" Her eyes flicked to the bruises covering its sides. "You were down there for days?"

The creature shivered and crouched down, trembling violently under their stunned gazes. "Are you going to eat me?" it whispered. "Or...or rip me apart with your claws?"

Saderia blinked in surprise while Dash gaped at it in silence, unable to speak or find his voice. "Of course not!" she exclaimed. "Why would we

do such a thing?”

It trembled with fear and uncertainty. “You’re so big...and you’re some of those strange creatures...We always thought you were dangerous...”

We? Studying it closely, she felt a shiver of unease. It didn’t look like any animal she had ever seen. “We’re not going to hurt you,” she stammered, trying not to think of it as an ‘it’ when its voice revealed it was a *he*. “Er...what exactly are you?”

He looked up at her with wide, terrified eyes. “I...I’m a kraguer.”

Blinking rapidly, Dash stared at him in astonishment. “A *what*?”

“A...a kraguer,” he stammered, hunching down in an attempt to disappear.

Saderia frowned at the word. It must be what his species was called, the way her species was tiger and Dash’s was lion. Taking a deep breath, she tried to push away her shock. “Well...I’m Saderia, a tiger, and this is Dash, a lion. What’s your name?”

Trying not to shiver, he slowly looked up. “It’s Jeb. Well, Jeben, actually, but this old friend...” He trailed off and looked down at his paws. Out of the corner of his eye, he peered up at the creatures and shivered. The creatures *seemed* nice, but a trace of fear still lingered along with a hint of wonder. What did the orange creature mean by ‘Princess?’

“Okay...” she murmured, trying to relax. “So...what were you doing in that hole?”

Jeb’s eyes widened in alarm. “Secka pushed me!” he gasped, not realizing the creatures wouldn’t understand. His heart skipped. What if Secka had killed Zerone?

Saderia and Dash exchanged a baffled glance. Flicking his tail nervously back and forth, Dash took a deep breath. “Okay...Okay, this is just a little too weird to deal with. So let me get this straight...there are others called kraguers that are like you...Jeb?”

Jeb hesitated and watched them warily before finally giving a meek nod.

Dash tried to hide his shock. “Do they all look like you—all yellow and...stuff?”

Jeb shrugged nervously. “They all have stripes, but they’re not all yellow. Some are red or brown...or gray...” He shivered. “Do all...tigers

and lions look like you two?”

Saderia glanced at Dash, then slowly met Jeb’s gaze. “Not exactly. Some tigers are white, but the rest are shades of orange and they usually have different stripes.”

“Lions look different, too,” Dash murmured with an uneasy glance at Saderia. “Most are a creamy or golden color. Not many lions are dark like me. And only the males have a mane,” he added, gesturing to the messy dark brown fur hanging over his face.

Jeb nodded, the fear in his eyes starting to fade into a guarded expression lit up by a tiny glimmer of curiosity. “Okay...and there are other creatures that are big like you...”

Wonder burned in Saderia’s mind as she nodded, suddenly feeling as if she was drowning in all the questions swirling through her mind. Shaking the thoughts out of her head, she frowned in unease. “Did you say someone pushed you in that hole?”

Jeb blinked in surprise and felt a rush of alarm. “Secka!” he gasped. “I’ve got to see if my Mom and Dad are okay and if the Emperor is still alive!”

Emperor? Saderia frowned in confusion at the strange term, but she tried to shake off the befuddlement. Glancing back in the direction they had come, she narrowed her eyes when she pictured the dark hole in the ground. Glancing back at Jeb, she paused then murmured, “Do you live in that underground cavern just a few feet away from here?”

Jeb glanced up at her in surprise and hesitantly nodded, his guarded, uncertain gaze lighting up with a hint of wonder. Something about the strange creature seemed eerily familiar... Taking a deep breath, he faced her and hesitated for a long moment. “Are...are you the animal that was down there the other day looking for food?”

Saderia’s eyes widened in realization. “Yes,” she exclaimed, meeting his unnerving blue and green eyes. “Were you the animal who saw me?”

He stared nervously down at his paws, his tail flicking fearfully back and forth. “Yes, that was me. I...I had never seen one of you up close before.”

“Well, we’ve never seen *anything* like you,” Dash replied, raising his eyebrows.

Jeb shrugged uncomfortably. "We've been hiding for a long time."

Saderia nodded uneasily. After a brief hesitation, she reluctantly looked down and murmured, "Well...I'd like to ask you more questions, but if you've been down in that pitfall for days, you should probably see your parents and get something to eat...Why don't we bring you back to that cavern and wait outside while you talk to your parents?"

Jeb hesitated for a long moment, then slowly nodded. "Okay, that sounds all right." He paused for another long beat of silence before taking a shaky breath and cautiously stepping forward. His heart beat faster with surprise and wonder when he saw them start to turn to follow him. He had actually spoken to strange creatures! The incredible thought clouded his mind as he padded toward the Spring until he realized he might have to face something scarier than both the creatures when he reached his home.

Darkness and freezing air washed over Jeb the instant he jumped through the hole into the underground, leaving the creatures behind. Gritting his teeth, he blinked and scanned the surroundings for any sign of his parents. His eyes widened in alarm when he spotted Secka standing only a few paces away. Racing forward, he dove into the basin and crouched down. Soft, whispering voices sounded just a few feet in front of him. Narrowing his eyes, he raised himself up and peeked over the top of the basin.

"I'm so sorry, Telku." Secka stood near Jeb's den with his head bowed in fake remorse. Telku and Jati stood in the entrance of their den. Grief colored Telku's bloodshot green eyes, while Jati's face was stricken with pain.

Secka sighed. "Telku, I know you and I haven't seen eye to eye recently, but the disappearance of one of our own is always painful. I've looked, but I haven't found Jeb. The creatures must have gotten him the same way they got the last one."

Telku's eyes widened in dismay. "Secka...it can't be...It can't be true."

Secka shook his head and let out another fake sigh. "I'm sorry, Telku."

A flash of fury surged through Jeb's body. Before he could think, he leapt out of the basin and landed on the stony ground. "No, he's not!"

Secka, Telku, and Jati whipped around at the sound of his voice and gaped in shock while the outlaws around the Spring looked up in wonder and curiosity to see what was going on. Secka's eyes widened in incredulity. Jeb's heart beat frantically with fear at confronting Secka, but something kept him from hiding from the cruel kraguer.

Telku and Jati gaped in amazement. A bright glimmer of relief lit up their eyes as they raced toward him. Stopping in front of him, they looked him over with stunned eyes.

"Jeb!" Jati gasped. "We thought the creatures had gotten you!"

Telku staggered forward and pressed against him with a long, relieved sigh. "I'm so glad you're back. We were so worried. We didn't know what to think." He drew back and frowned at the scars across his face and the dirt smeared across his fur. "Are you okay?"

Jeb nodded shakily, trying to hide a glimmer of fear at his close call. "I'm fine," he murmured. "Just a little hungry and bruised from the fall."

Jati frowned and narrowed her eyes. "Fall?"

Jeb opened his mouth to speak, but before he could find the words to tell them what had happened, a cool voice interrupted him.

"Jeb. What a pleasant surprise." The three of them looked back to see Secka standing just a few paces away from them. His dark eyes locked on Jeb, glinting with a dangerous gleam. "We were all *so worried* when you went missing."

Jeb narrowed his eyes and forced himself to face him. "Did you kill Zerone?"

Telku's eyes widened in shock, while Jati gaped at him in incredulity. "What?"

Secka narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about, Jeben?"

Jeb gritted his teeth. "You know what I'm talking about!" Feeling a shiver race up his spine, he whirled around to look at his parents with frightened eyes. "Is Zerone dead?"

Telku and Jati blinked and exchanged a baffled glance. After a long hesitation, they shook their heads. "Zerone's fine," Telku murmured. "We just saw him. We went to his Court to see if he had seen or taken you. He's fine." He frowned. "What's this about?"

Jeb hesitated and cast a nervous glance at Secka. The gray kraguer narrowed his eyes and coldly met his gaze, his gray eyes burning with fury.

A wave of cold fear washed over Jeb at the thought of ratting him out...but what could Secka do that he hadn't already done? Narrowing his eyes, Jeb took a deep breath. "Mom, Dad...the reason I've been missing is Secka. He pushed me in a pitfall days ago when I left to find Zerone."

His parents' eyes widened in shock, but before they could utter a word, a furious growl echoed through the Spring. Secka glared at Jeb with blazing gray eyes.

"You stupid little *snitch!*" he roared, making the walls tremble at the sound. Unsheathing his claws, he leapt toward Jeb with a loud, booming snarl.

"Secka!" Telku leapt toward him with a furious roar and pushed him away. His green eyes blazed with fury and a growl rumbled in his throat. "How dare you?!"

Jati let out a furious hiss. "I'll rip to you shreds, you worthless scum!" Lashing her tail, she lunged toward him with her claws outstretched and her eyes gleaming with anger.

The outlaws around the Spring gaped in shock at the violent fray. Stumbling backward, Secka leapt to his paws and faced Telku and Jati with glinting gray eyes, while they stood protectively in front of Jeb. Baring his fangs, he stalked toward them with a cold, threatening glare. Other outlaws crept out of their dens and stared at them in shock. Some of Secka's followers stalked toward Telku and Jati with a dangerous growl. Glancing at the kraguers joining him, Secka looked back at Jeb. A crooked sneer spread across his face. With a furious snarl, he leapt toward Telku, sending him rolling to the ground while the outlaws on his side lunged toward Jati and Jeb with violent growls.

The other outlaws gasped in surprise. Soon a roar of cheers and excitement rippled through the cave. The outlaws leapt to their paws in excitement, cheering them on. Jeb felt a jolt of surprise when he realized most of the cheers were for his side.

Secka's eyes blazed with fury and his enraged roar echoed around the Spring. "You traitors! When this is over, every one of you will die!"

Strange shouts and cries echoed from deep inside the cavern, making shivers of unease creep up Saderia's spine. Frowning, she glanced down at the hole leading into the underground and felt a tingle of worry. A

weird but familiar tug made her feel a strange connection to Jeb even though she had just met him. Somehow she couldn't shake off the feeling that he was in trouble. Hadn't he said someone had pushed him in that pitfall?

Dash frowned in unease. "Do you think something bad is happening down there?"

A rush of alarm shot through Saderia's body. "Yes," she exclaimed, jumping to her paws and creeping closer to the entrance to the cavern. "Should we go down there?"

Dash frowned in uncertainty. "I don't know. That Jeb creature seemed kind of afraid of us. What if we scare the animals down there and nothing bad is happening?"

A shrill shriek rose up from the cavern, raising the fur along Saderia's back. "That's a chance we'll have to take. I don't want anybody to get hurt. Come on!"

Cheers rang out through the Spring, growing louder with each passing second. The outlaws screamed with fury and excitement as the snarls of Secka, his followers, and Jeb's family echoed around the Spring. Jeb's eyes widened with horror and the wild scene blurred around him. Kraguers lined the edges of the Spring, forming a circle around them and closing in closer and closer. Their eyes gleamed as they let out wild, raucous cheers. The sickening scent of blood hung thickly in the musty air of the underground.

Panting heavily, Jeb whipped around to look to his left. His eyes widened in horror when he saw two kraguers lunge toward his father and slam his back up against the ground with a vicious crack. Blood dripped through his father's fur. Kicking out wildly with his paws, Telku struggled to push the outlaws away, but the two criminals dug their claws into his paws to hold him down. Feeling a jolt of terror and dismay, Jeb started toward him, then froze at the sound of a shrill, furious hiss. Whirling around, he gasped when he saw three outlaws tackle his mother. Hissing wildly, Jati lashed out with her claws, catching the ears of her attackers and spilling their blood. Digging their claws into her bloody back, they pinned her down. Hissing madly, Jati thrashed to get free.



Gaping in horror and terror, Jeb staggered toward her, then froze when a low growl echoed over the wild noise. Whipping around, he felt his heart stop in fear when he saw Secka standing just a few feet away from him, his gray fur bristling and his fangs bared in a dangerous snarl. Staggering backward, Jeb tried to get away, but Secka lunged toward him. A shriek of pain and fear tore out of Jeb's chest when the outlaw shoved him against the rough ground. Blood seeped out of his shoulders past Secka's sharp, shaking claws. Gasping in terror, Jeb opened his eyes and stared up into the furious face of Secka.

Secka let out a dangerous snarl. "You're going to pay, you stupid, pathetic *freak!*"

A terrified scream ripped out of Jeb's chest when the outlaw buried his fangs in his throat, but before the outlaw could bite harder, a deafening roar erupted in the Spring.

***"Get away from him right now!"***

Secka paused while Jeb's heart stopped. Tearing his fangs away from Jeb, Secka looked up, then froze. Blinking his eyes open, Jeb watched as Secka's eyes grew wide with shock and his mouth gaped open. A horrified gasp tore out of his chest. Around the Spring, a hush fell over the outlaws. The screams and snarls faded away into nothing but tense, horrified silence. Staring unblinkingly with wide, terrified gray eyes at something behind Jeb, Secka staggered away from him, his paws shaking with fear. His paws scrabbled frantically on the stone as he scrambled to get away. His chest heaved with frightened pants. Blinking in surprise, Jeb shakily pushed himself to his paws and turned to look at what Secka had seen. He froze in shock when he spotted the orange creature and the dark brown animal standing just a few feet behind him, bristling in fury.

Saderia and Dash's amber eyes blazed with anger and determination as they glared at Secka. Their enormous claws scraped the rocky ground and their fur stood on end. Their huge, gleaming fangs were bared in dark, furious snarls. Silence hung over the cavern, broken only by their cold, threatening growls. The outlaws stood frozen in place, their expressions twisted in horror and their eyes wide with shock and disbelief.

Scanning the cavern with her flaming amber gaze, Saderia let out a low, dangerous snarl. "Everyone leave him alone and get away from him. *Now!*"

The kraguers stared at them in horror. Screams suddenly erupted throughout the underground. Claws scrabbled frantically against the ground and raw, earsplitting shrieks rang out among the outlaws. Kraguers slammed against one another, throwing each other to the ground and trampling them in their desperation to get to their cave dens.

Secka's followers looked up at the creatures in horror. Letting out tiny whimpers of terror, they lunged away from Jeb's parents. With shrieks of terror and muted sobs, they whirled around and raced away as fast as they could, their claws scraping violently across the rock and leaving behind long scars in the stone and splintered pieces of claws.

Secka stood frozen near the back of the den, trembling with terror and staring at the creatures with wild, horrified gray eyes. Terrified outlaws shoved past him, pushing him to the side and nearly throwing him to the ground. The gray outlaw barely seemed to notice the raucous cries and sobs echoing throughout the Spring or the rough shoving of the outlaws. His rapid, frantic breath seemed to stop when the creatures' gaze locked on him. A tiny whimpering sound spilled out of his mouth. Jeb whirled around just in time to see his eyes slip shut and his paws give out underneath him. In front of Jeb and all of the other shrieking kraguers, he crumpled to the ground and fainted on the rocky floor. The only sign he hadn't died of terror was the frantic rising and falling of his chest.

Blinking in shock, Jeb stared at him for a long moment before slowly turning to face the creatures behind him. On either side of him, his parents staggered to their paws and stared at the creatures with eyes wide with horror. Frozen to the spot and petrified with terror, they glanced frantically back and forth between Jeb and the creatures standing barely a foot away from him, their eyes widening in horror. Outlaws pushed past his frozen parents. The wild screams of the outlaws grew louder, burning in Jeb's ears.

*"We're all going to die!"* someone shrieked. Terrified cries followed, echoing off the walls and filling the entire Spring. Jeb stared at the creatures with wide, stunned eyes. Blood seeped out of the bite marks in his neck, but he barely noticed the pain. A grateful smile spread over his face. He had been right about the creatures all along. He had only met them a moment ago, but they had saved his life. Without them, he would be dead.

“J-Jeb?” Blinking in surprise, Jeb turned to see his parents staring at the creatures with wide, horrified eyes. A wave of sympathy washed over him when he saw how tense they were and when he read the terror gleaming in their green and blue/gray eyes.

He managed a kind smile. “Mom, Dad, it’s okay. They’re not going to hurt us.”

Telku and Jati stared with stunned eyes. “How can you know?” Telku choked out.

Jeb flicked his tail. “I just do. They saved my life twice. You can trust them.”

Telku blinked several times, while Jati stared at the creatures in disbelief. Shaking with fear, Telku tried to relax. “I...I believe *you*. But... you have a lot to explain. *A lot*.”

Jeb let out a soft sigh. “I know. I will.”

Saderia looked around at the strange animals fleeing to their dens. A twinge of guilt stung her when she saw their terrified faces, but she felt a pang of satisfaction at being able to scare off the ones who had tried to hurt the little Jeb creature. What grudge could they hold against him anyway? Shaking off her thoughts, she glanced at Jeb and the kraguers behind him. “If you don’t mind, we would like to ask some questions, as well.”

Jeb managed a slight smile. “Why don’t we all go to my cave den and talk?”

Jati frowned in nervousness and uncertainty. “Can they fit?”

“I think so,” Telku murmured. Taking a deep breath, he tried to relax. “All right, let’s calm down. We do have a lot to discuss. Jeb...are you sure they’re not dangerous?”

Jeb nodded, giving them a slight smile. “I’m sure.”

Saderia sheathed her claws and gave them a nod. “We won’t lay a paw on you.”

Jeb glanced up at them and grinned, feeling suddenly less terrified and more at ease. He felt a twinge of excitement about speaking to the creatures. Smiling, he led the way toward the den and felt a tiny glow of eagerness. They did have a lot to discuss.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

## Kraguers

Cold, rocky walls rose up on all sides of them, lined with crisscrossing stalactites and stalagmites. Saderia and Dash had to duck to squeeze through the small, jagged entrance to Jeb's cave den and sat hunched over at the back of the small den to avoid hitting their head on the ceiling. Telku and Jati crept in cautiously behind them and stood against the wall farthest from the creatures, their eyes narrowed with fear and uncertainty. Behind them, Jeb padded calmly into the cave den and sat closer to the creatures, seeming more at ease even though a gleam of fear still lingered in his green and blue gaze.

Saderia took a deep breath. "We would like to understand more about your life."

The green-eyed kraguer took a shaky breath. "Of course. I suppose we should start with introductions." He hesitated, then held out a tiny paw. "I'm Telku, Jeb's father."

Saderia managed a slight smile and gently shook his paw. "Nice to meet you."

The other kraguer narrowed her eyes, her blue and gray irises gleaming with fear and defiance. "I'm Jati," she challenged, holding out a stiff paw. "His mother."

Saderia smiled and carefully shook her paw as well before letting it drop back down to the ground. "I'm Saderia, and this is my friend, Dash," she murmured, gesturing to the lion. Beside her, Dash managed to give them a slight smile and a tentative wave.

Telku nodded slowly. "What would you like to know?"

Saderia hesitated. "First of all, how was this forest and the kraguers...created?"

Telku frowned in confusion and shrugged. "I don't know."

Her eyes widened. "You don't? How can you not know when you live here?"

Telku shrugged defensively. "It's not like we were around when it happened. Some of the others might know some old legends, but I doubt anyone truly knows. This forest is just here. It's always been here. We've never really thought about it."

Saderia let out a sigh of disappointment. "All right, I understand." She hesitated. "Jeb mentioned an Emperor, so what is that? Which one of you is the Emperor?"

Jeb faced them with a twinge of unease. "Emperor Zerone leads the kraguers. He's in charge, he makes all the decisions, and he has a lot of guards and stuff like that."

Saderia nodded slowly, realizing that being Emperor sounded a lot like being King. Both seemed to be in charge of making decisions for the forest.

Jeb hesitated. "He also has a daughter. Her name's Keruni and she's the Empress-to-be. That means that when Zerone, well...dies...she'll take his place as the Empress of the forest. And when she has a kid, it'll take her place later on and so on and so on."

Falling silent, Jeb stared down at his paws, his eyes gleaming with unease. After a long hesitation, he reluctantly murmured, "None of the kraguers here are the Emperor... Zerone lives in his Court, which is a long way away from this place."

Saderia blinked. "Oh, so you have different neighborhoods and things like that?"

Jeb frowned in confusion. "No...He and his kraguers live there and we live here."

Dash narrowed his eyes in unease. "What do you mean by *his* kraguers?"

Jeb avoided their eyes. "Well...technically the Emperor doesn't control the kraguers living here anymore..." He hesitated, his fur burning in unease. "At some point, he cast us away from his Empire and this Spring is where we were forced to go."

Memories of the outcasts Saderia had learned about in the desert flashed through her mind and she couldn't help but wonder if it was anything like that.

Jeb took a deep breath. "Anyway...technically the kraguers living here did some...criminal act to get sent here. This is where the outlaws

live.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in alarm. “You three are *outlaws*?”

Telku’s eyes flashed with pain and fury. “We were *framed*!”

Dash frowned. “Framed? Was it by that gray guy that attacked you?”

“No,” Jeb muttered. “We were actually framed by the Emperor himself.”

Saderia felt a tingle of unease, but looking into Jeb’s eyes, she couldn’t help but feel a pang of sympathy. She had met true criminals like Dastarius, Lolista, and Bone—animals without a conscious who would kill for their own gain. Jeb and his family didn’t seem anything like them. “Why would he do that?” she whispered. The kraguers’ society didn’t seem as corrupt as the dingoes’, but maybe there had been a misunderstanding.

Jeb blinked in surprise, stunned that she was giving him a chance to explain. “Well...it’s a bit of a long story. I...I don’t actually know why anymore.”

Telku frowned in confusion. “But we do know why.”

“Well...we used to, but I’m not so sure anymore. I haven’t told you about the things that have happened lately.” Turning to the creatures, he paused then murmured, “A year ago, Zerone started a fire that nearly destroyed the forest. No one really knows why he did it or if it was an accident, but it hurt a lot of kraguers. Once it stopped, Zerone didn’t want to be hated, so he blamed the kraguers closest to him when the fire started—me and my Dad. We actually helped Zerone get out of the fire, but he still blamed us.”

“Oh,” Saderia murmured, feeling a tingle of sympathy. “That’s awful.” Seeing the pain in his eyes, she could sense he was telling the truth. He didn’t seem the type to lie.

Jeb looked up with eyes wide with uncertainty. “That’s the original story. But...that’s where I get confused. I found out a lot of different things lately and I don’t know if it was Zerone that started the fire anymore.” He trailed off, longing to explain, but knowing that now wasn’t the time. He sighed. “I guess we can talk about that later. You creatures probably want to know what we’ve been doing while you’ve been here.”

Telku and Jati tensed at his words and exchanged nervous glances.

Saderia frowned, feeling a tiny jolt of unease. “Yes, we’d like to know.”

Jeb took a deep breath. “Well, when you came here, we were terrified because we had never seen anything like you and you come from...The Land Beyond the Forest.” A shiver raced down his spine and his parents shuddered and looked away.

Saderia blinked in surprise, stunned by how afraid they were of the lands past the forest border. Frowning, she couldn’t help but wonder if the bloody hounds in the desert had anything to do with their fear. “Do you know about the dingoes?”

Jeb blinked in confusion. “What are...dingoes?”

Saderia frowned and realized they must just be afraid of the lands outside the forest and the prospect of leaving. Noticing their strange appearance, she couldn’t help but sympathize, knowing they would stand out. She wasn’t sure how the dingoes would react to the strange creatures, but it wouldn’t be good. The kraguers seemed easily frightened, and if they met up with danger, she doubted they would be able to fight.

Thinking back to what Jeb had said, she felt a pang of guilt. What if she and the forest animals had been to the kraguers what the hunters had been to her? Had she sent an entire group of animals into hiding the same way the hunters had done to her?

Jeb glanced down at his paws. “Anyway, when you first came here, you were terrifying. We were sure you would find us and hurt us because you were so strange...”

She felt a sharp pang of guilt. “I’m sorry,” she murmured. “What happened then?”

Jeb shrugged uncomfortably. “Some of you started coming to the Spring to get water. The first thing we did was drain the water so you would stop coming down here.”

Understanding dawned in Saderia’s eyes. “So that was you,” she murmured. “I wasn’t actually in the forest when the others were going into the Spring, but my Mom told me about this place and how the water mysteriously disappeared.”

Jeb nodded guiltily. “That was probably the mildest thing we did.”

Saderia blinked in surprise and felt a cold chill of understanding sweep through her. “What else did you do?” she murmured, trying to hide

the knowing look in her eyes.

Jeb took a deep breath. “We...we thought you were dangerous and we thought you would find us and kill us. After a while, we...we decided we would have to drive you out.” He hesitated, his eyes wide with regret. “It started out harmless. We found this weird...vine-like thing in the ground and we figured out it carried light to your dens...”

“The wire for the electricity,” Saderia murmured, her eyes lighting up with realization. “Are...are you the ones that cut it and took away all our light?”

Jeb nodded guiltily. “We thought if we got rid of your stuff, you would leave.”

Saderia leaned closer to Dash. “We found a paw print near the wire. Remember?”

Dash nodded in understanding. “Yeah, it had that weird mark between the toes.”

Saderia nodded and glanced down at Jeb’s paws, scanning the strange green skin linking his toes together. “That must have been the webbing on their paws.”

“What about the warehouse?” Dash added, glancing at Jeb out of the corner of his eye. “Didn’t we find a paw print there after all the things had been destroyed? And...”

“A piece of bright yellow fur with a black stripe on the end of it,” Saderia finished. “It must have been the fur of one of the kraguers.” She faced Jeb sadly. “Jeb, did you guys find a big den in a huge clearing and destroy all the things that were inside?”

Jeb looked down, trying to push away the guilt. “Yes,” he whimpered. “That was one of the other things we did.” He hesitated and met their gaze with wide, pleading eyes. “I’m so sorry. Really. I didn’t know you creatures were harmless. None of us did.”

Saderia let out a heavy sigh. All the pain that had plagued the forest had all been over a misunderstanding... “It’s okay,” she murmured. “What else did you do?”

Jeb sighed. “The outlaws and I started meeting with Zerone to come up with ways to drive you out. My Dad started the meetings to try to help us and we started out with little things...but then it got bad. Secka—that kraguer that attacked me—took over and after that it turned brutal. He



decided to start taking the fruit off the trees. He said it was to drive you out, but his plans were really just an excuse for him to try to kill Zerone.”

Telku’s eyes widened in shock. “What?” he gasped.

Jeb sighed and glanced over at his father. “He was trying to kill Zerone.”

A dark chill crept over Saderia when she thought about all the pain they had endured. Memories of Dash lying sick in bed, too weak to move, made her heart ache. She had come so close to losing her best friend because of the lack of food. “What happened next with the food idea?” she murmured.

Jeb looked down. “Secka and his followers started taking the food and hiding it in the Spring. He wasn’t doing it just to hurt you. He was taking the food and hiding it here because then Zerone wouldn’t have it either. He was the one he was trying to starve. We weren’t involved this time and we tried to put the food back on the trees for you.”

Surprise and a hint of gratitude glimmered in Saderia’s eyes. If Telku and Jeb had tried to put the food back, that explained the strange disappearances and reappearances.

“We tried to bring as much food back as possible,” Jeb murmured. “But...then a kraguer was killed and Secka said you creatures had killed him. That was why we stopped bringing the food back.” He hesitated. “It wasn’t a creature that killed him, though. Secka did it and framed you to make everyone fear you and stop returning the food.”

Telku gaped down at his son in shock. “*Secka* killed him?”

Jati blinked in surprise. “I never thought he was a *killer*! A jerk, maybe, but...”

Saderia frowned in confusion. “Why would Secka go through all of that?”

Jeb shrugged. “I don’t know why. I think he just wanted to kill Zerone because he exiled Secka to the Spring. I don’t know what kind of crime he committed to get sent here and he never seemed to care about being down here, but it must have really bothered him. When you came here, he must have seen an opportunity to get revenge on Zerone.”

Telku stared at him in surprise. “Why didn’t you tell us this?”

Jati lashed her tail. “Isn’t it obvious? Secka’s mad! Jeb’s been afraid of things way less scary than him! He was too terrified to say a word and

for good reason this time!”

Jeb flattened his ears and narrowed his eyes at her, but didn't respond.

Telku frowned. “What's the story for when Zerone came here and accused you?”

Jeb let out a long sigh and carefully began explaining everything that had happened in the battle between Secka and Zerone. A hint of fear rose in his chest when he told them how he had gotten caught in the crossfire, but he tried to ignore it.

Saderia listened closely, her mind whirling. Sorrow and regret washed over her when she thought about all the horrible things that had happened to both of them because of the misunderstanding. Now that she had discovered them, the misunderstanding was over. Maybe now they could put their differences behind them and the ordeal would be over. “Jeb, Telku, Jati,” she murmured when Jeb finished his story. “As long as this is over...as long as there is no more sabotage...we should just put this behind us and start over. I can leave this in the past if you promise you won't try to sabotage us again.”

Jeb's eyes lit up with hope, and Telku let out a relieved sigh. “We appreciate your kindness,” the older kraguer said, dipping his head. “We were very wrong about you.”

“Not quite.” Saderia, Jeb, Telku, and Jati looked up in surprise to see Dash frowning at the four of them. “You are creatures unlike *anything* the forest animals have ever seen. Some of them might have been afraid and overreacted and hurt you if they had seen you. I don't know if we should introduce you to the forest just yet. They barely trust each other, much less strange creatures like you...especially after the last time they met different animals.”

“The dingoes,” Saderia murmured, her eyes narrowing in understanding. “I think he's right. Sometimes we have a tendency to...destroy things that are different from us.”

“We understand,” Telku muttered gravely. “We know it must have been hard to live in this forest with us sabotaging you. If you don't want to introduce us, that's fine.”

Saderia nodded, thinking about how she had struggled to survive. “That reminds me...have there always been disasters? And has the water

always been poisoned?”

Telku sighed. “Yes, it’s always been like that. The disasters have always happened and we avoid rivers, although we know a few that aren’t poisonous, like the water that used to be in the Spring. Kraguers have always lived underground because of the disasters. Zerone’s Court—where his Empire lives—is also underground.”

Saderia nodded. Glancing around at the tiny cave, she couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like to live underground surrounded by dark, rocky walls.

“What about you?” Jeb asked. “What’s your life and your society like?”

Blinking away her thoughts, Saderia hesitated, then carefully began explaining how her kingdom was ruled by the King and Queen and how she and Dash were the Princess and Prince. She described their duties and after a moment of hesitation, she told them about her old home and how the hunters had forced them to leave. She trailed off when she told them how her kingdom had settled in the forest and struggled to survive.

Telku heaved a long, regretful sigh. “So you’ve been in the same situation,” he murmured. “We’re very sorry for all that we did, but I know an apology is not enough.”

Saderia let out a soft breath. “It’s all right. We should focus on what we’re going to do now. I...I don’t think we should tell the forest about your existence yet. But...”

“There will be no more sabotage,” Telku promised.

“I think you scared Secka badly enough that he’ll stop,” Jeb added, hiding a smile.

Saderia managed a weak smile. “Good. I’ll keep your existence a secret for now. There’s some things going on with our family right now anyway, so now wouldn’t be a good time to spring this on them,” she added, wincing at the thought of her mother.

Dash’s eyes widened. “Speaking of them, we need to get home. We’ve been out here for a long time, and Cia’s probably starting to get worried.”

Saderia blinked at him in surprise. “You’re right! We *do* have to get home!”

“Wait!” Saderia and Dash whirled around at the sound of Jeb’s alarmed voice. He blinked and looked down in embarrassment. “Um...will I see you two again?”

Saderia hesitated and felt a tiny glow of excitement at the thought of returning to talk to Jeb. “We can probably get away and visit tomorrow. Would that be all right?”

Jeb looked up in surprise, then smiled. “Sure!”

Saderia grinned. Even though she had only met Jeb a few minutes ago, she found herself looking forward to coming back. Maybe he would be a good ally. Maybe he would even be a close friend. She smiled and felt a strong feeling of warmth. Whatever happened next, she had a good feeling about him, a feeling she trusted.

Tall trees rose up into the sky, reaching out with long, sharp branches. The leaves rustled in a soft breeze. Underneath the leaves was a tiny clearing hidden by the thick undergrowth. A tiny kraguer sat close to the thick bushes on the edge of the clearing. When Saderia looked closer, she recognized the wide blue and green eyes of Jeb. Across from him sat a small, blurry kraguer staring out at the woods with distant pure green eyes.

Jeb leaned closer to the hazy kraguer, then jumped back when she let out a furious hiss. Glaring at him with blazing green eyes, the other kraguer spat in fury. “She’s pure evil, Jeb! She’s just putting on an act! She’s dangerous! You’ve got to believe me!”

Jeb shrank back. “It would be easier if you told me *why* she was evil...”

A twinge of fear seeped into the other kraguer’s narrowed green eyes. “I can’t tell you.” Shaking her head, she growled. “I have to do something to get rid of her!” Dropping her voice, she muttered something under her breath, her eyes growing darker.

Jeb’s eyes widened. “Did you say you have *matches* in your room?”

A dark glimpse of the kraguer’s cold green eyes flashed through the woods before the leaves rustled and covered the scene in darkness. Through the darkness, a sinister crackling noise rose in the distance. Overpowering heat washed over Saderia. A sharp smash echoed close beside her. Her eyes widened in horror when the blackness whisked away.

Flames flickered through the forest. Dark smoke billowed into the air while trees groaned in unison with the raw screams echoing around the woods. The blaze climbed the trees, seeming to set the sky on fire. The black skeletons of the burning trees seemed to crumble underneath the heat. Flames danced on the outskirts of a tiny clearing. A small kraguer stood helplessly in the middle, her green eyes wide with panic. A deafening screech filled the air. Whipping around, the tiny creature let out a shrill scream when a huge, flaming oak started to collapse. Frozen, the creature watched in horror as the tree hurdled toward her, then let out a sharp cry when a bigger kraguer lunged toward her and pulled her away. An earsplitting smash echoed through the forest when the tree smacked into the spot where they had stood, sending flaming bits of bark flying through the woods.

Saderia let out a gasp when the scene flickered away and she found herself standing away from the wild flames. The fire roared several feet away, blocking out the sun with smoke. Sitting in front of her were two kraguers covered in ash. Harsh sobs tore out of the small kraguer who had buried her face in the chest of the older one.

"I...I didn't mean to!" she sobbed. "I s-swear, Daddy! I only m-meant to..."

"I know." The older kraguer looked down at her with dark gray and green eyes and gently patted her back. "It's okay. I know now."

The smaller kraguer stared up at him in shock. "You know... about...her?"

The older figure gave a grave nod.

Shivering violently, the smaller kraguer pressed close against him. "What now?"

A dark shadow flitted across the older one's face. "I'll protect you. Somehow."

The younger one shuddered in horror. "What if she's dead?"

The older one squeezed his eyes shut and let out a long, shaky breath. "Then it's over. Just forget this. Just forget *all* of it. Everything will be all right."

The smaller kraguer looked up with wide eyes before slowly facing the roaring fire. Her eyes grew distant and absent and her sobs slowly faded away. "Okay, Daddy..."

Beyond them, smoke billowed up into the sky, hiding the blaze and plunging the scene into darkness. Saderia's heart skipped when she saw a bright, golden light shine through the blackness. She stared in awe as shining words appeared in front of her.

The daughter of the fiftieth generation of the royal family will be gifted with the Power of Dreams stronger than any member of the royal family before her. Her soul will guide her through her destined path, and will help lost souls find themselves again. The hardships she will face will give her strength. She will go on to do many great things, and Heart, Crown, Scepter, Eye and Dreams will help and guide her.

Saderia jolted awake with a gasp. Looking around wildly, she tried to slow the rapid beating of her heart when she saw only plain walls instead of flames and smoke. Letting out a shaky sigh, she tried to relax. Taking a deep breath, she felt a tingle of excitement and let memories of the Dream wash over her. Remembering the first part, she wondered who Jeb had been talking to and who the other kraguer hated. Shivers raced down her spine when she thought about the fire and the creepy conversation between the two unfamiliar kraguers. Thinking back to her talk with Jeb, she remembered he had been framed and realized what the part about the fire meant. Everything else was unfamiliar.

Pushing away a twinge of annoyance, she felt a glow of hope when she realized that when she visited Jeb, she could ask him who the other kraguers were. Was it really a good idea to let Jeb know about the Dreams, though? A small, instinctual feeling seemed to urge her on and she couldn't help but smile when she remembered the last part of the Dream. Seeing the prophecy meant it still believed in her, but it had another meaning. After meeting Jeb only yesterday, her Dream had immediately reminded her of the prophecy. His life seemed to overlap with hers everywhere she turned and she couldn't help but feel a familiar pull toward him. Somehow he had to be connected to the prophecy.

Blinking out of her thoughts, she looked up to see Dash step into view. He paused in the entrance, then smiled. She couldn't help but grin back when he leapt up beside her.

"Good morning. How are you feeling?" she asked, flicking him with her tail.

“Great!” He studied her and grinned. “I know that look. You’re on to something.”

She let out a good-natured sigh. “I was just wondering if Jeb was somehow connected to the prophecy. Do you get the same feeling about him as I do?”

Dash shrugged. “He’s different and the prophecy seems to attract... well, freaks.”

She rolled her eyes with a playful flick of her tail. “I just know the feeling so well by now. I really do think he’s part of the prophecy.”

Dash frowned thoughtfully. “He seems kind of timid and maybe a bit too trusting, but overall I suppose you could be right about him.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You were kind of timid when I first met you.”

He grinned and shrugged. “True. I don’t know, Saderia. It’s your prophecy. You know what’s best and who’s a part of it and who’s not.”

She nodded thoughtfully, letting her mind wander back to Jeb. The familiar feeling she got about him reminded her of the same feelings she had gotten for Dash. There was no way it could be a coincidence that her life seemed so intertwined with Jeb’s. He had to be part of the prophecy. Shaking her thoughts away, she turned back to Dash. “I do think he’s a part of it. I even had a Dream last night that kind of hinted at it.”

His eyes lit up in a smile. “Really? What was your Dream about?”

She sighed. “I’m not entirely sure. It was about Jeb and some other kraguers, but without knowing who they were, I have no hope of knowing what it’s about.” She paused uncomfortably. “I’ve actually had a few Dreams before, but...I kind of hid them...”

Dash sighed. “I had guessed you were hiding Dreams from me a while ago.”

Her face burned in embarrassment. “I’m sorry. Most of the Dreams I had involved Jeb, though. When we see him today, I think I’ll ask him about his past to understand them.”

Dash nodded slowly. “All right, but be careful. Some animals are kind of sensitive about their past, and considering he was framed, he might be secretive about it.”

She sighed. “I know and I will be. Hopefully Jeb can shed some light on my Dreams.” She started to say something else, then instantly

broke off when she saw Cia padding toward her room. Following her gaze, Dash instantly clamped his mouth shut.

Oblivious to their conversation, Cia sighed and stepped into Saderia's room. "Good morning. What were you two talking about?" she murmured distractedly.

Saderia exchanged a long glance with Dash. "Um...nothing."

Blinking out of her thoughts, Cia held up an apple. "Can you do me a favor? I can't convince Karenisha to eat this apple and she might listen to you better than me."

A dark, uneasy frown spread across Saderia's face. "She's not eating?"

Cia uneasily avoided her gaze. "Well...she says she's not hungry, but I don't want her getting weak. She's still convinced that...well, you know...the Makero thing...and I don't know if she's getting better or not. Either way, she needs to keep up her strength."

Cold worry swept through Saderia's body. "Maybe we should stay home today," she murmured. "We were thinking of going, um, exploring, but if Mom's doing worse..."

"No, no, feel free to go exploring," Cia said quickly, not wanting to ruin her good spirits. "I'll take care of her. Just see if you can get her to eat this, then you can go."

Saderia frowned before slowly sliding off the bed. Taking the apple with a worried glance, she brushed past her and peeked into Karenisha's room. Her heart ached when she saw her mother lying listlessly on the bed with her back turned to her and Dash.

"Mom?" she whispered, stepping closer to the bed.

The Queen didn't move or respond.

Frowning, Dash hesitantly tapped Karenisha with his tail. "Karenisha?"

With a sigh, she rolled over and faced them with bloodshot eyes. A shiver raced down Saderia's spine when her dull eyes stared straight through her. "Um...Mom?" She held up the apple and tried to smile. "Hey, look, this apple is good. Do you want it?"

The Queen sighed and looked away. "No, Saderia. I'm not hungry. You eat it."

She looked away. "I, uh, already ate."



The Queen narrowed her eyes. "No, you didn't. You just woke up."

Saderia frowned. "Well, I'll eat soon. Please. I don't think you're eating enough."

She flicked her tail sharply. "I'm eating fine."

Saderia narrowed her eyes. "That's not what Cia says."

Karenisha curled her lip. "Cia lies."

Saderia frowned. "I don't think she does."

Karenisha let out a long, heavy sigh. "No, you think I'm the liar, don't you?"

Saderia's face burned with shame. Memories of the night she had yelled at her mother and aunt after overhearing them talking about Karenisha's Dream made her heart ache with regret. She sighed. "Mom... about that night...I just overreacted. We both did. I shouldn't have yelled at you like that, but...there's no evidence that my Dad is...dead."

Karenisha shook her head and looked away. "There's plenty of evidence."

Saderia lashed her tail in annoyance. "Just because you 'saw' it..."

"Just because *you* don't believe in Dreams anymore..."

"I *do* believe in Dreams," Saderia interrupted. "Maybe I lost my belief for a while, but I believe now and I still think you misinterpreted it or saw something wrong."

Pain flashed in her eyes and she rapidly turned away. "Believe what you want."

Saderia's ears drooped. "Mom, please, I'm really starting to worry about you..."

Karenisha let out a soft sigh, her tail twitching miserably back and forth.

Dash gave Karenisha a gentle tap of his paw. "Karenisha, I know you're upset, but we're all starting to worry about you. It would make us feel better if you ate the apple." When she reluctantly turned to him, he gave her a weak smile. "Please? For your family?"

Karenisha watched him for a long moment with dull, miserable eyes before letting out a defeated sigh and holding out her paw to take it. "It's a waste of food."

Saderia shrugged. "We have a lot of food now. Even if we run out, we can pick more." Out of the corner of her eye, she gave Dash a grateful

smile.

“Fine.” After a hesitation, she carefully took a bite out of the apple. “Happy?”

Saderia smiled and nodded. “Thanks, Mom.”

Karenisha nodded weakly, letting out a sigh and gazing lifelessly out at the wall. Exchanging a glance with Dash, Saderia slowly backed out of the room. Forcing herself to look away, she felt a shiver of dread race up her spine. What had happened to her?

“Saderia?” She looked up to see Cia face her in unease. “Did she take the apple?”

Saderia glanced back at the room and gave a weak nod. “Yeah, she took it.”

A glow of relief spread across Cia’s face and she gave them a grateful smile. “Great. Thank you. You can go play now. I’ll take care of her, I promise.”

“All right.” Glancing toward the entrance of the den, she stepped forward with Dash close beside her. When she reached the entrance, she paused and looked back at the dark room where her mother laid with her back turned to them. A cold feeling of unease crept down her spine when she saw how dirty her mother’s fur had gotten and when she remembered the distant look in her eyes. Cia had promised she would take care of her and help her, but Saderia was beginning to wonder if that was a promise she could keep.

Sunlight shimmered into the Spring, dusting the stony floor with a warm yellow light. Jeb sat in the entrance to his den, staring out at the cavern around him. His bright yellow fur gleamed in the light, untainted by blood and marred only by faded wounds that had already begun to heal. Outlaws sat around the Spring, their eyes darting back and forth, as if expecting an ambush. After Saderia and Dash had left last night, Jeb had managed to coax the kraguers out of hiding to explain that the creatures wouldn’t hurt them, but to stop tormenting them. The outlaws had instantly agreed to stop the sabotage. The scare the creatures had given them had convinced them it would be wise not to anger them.

Jeb’s gaze flicked to the stony ground close to the basin and a slight shiver ran through him. A few tiny drops of dried blood still stained the

floor. His eyes locked on the spot where the fight had taken place and the Spring around him seemed to grow darker at the memory. Hours ago, he and the outlaws had sat with their eyes locked on Secka's unconscious form. Staring at his closed eyes and rapidly heaving chest, Jeb couldn't help but feel sorry for him, abandoned on the ground without any real friends.

Slowly the gray outlaw had blinked open his blurry eyes. A gleam of shock had dawned in his gray irises and he had leapt up in alarm when he found himself surrounded by the criminals' burning gazes. He stood frozen to the spot in shock, gazing around at all of them with wide, stunned eyes. "What are you all staring at?" he had demanded.

Jeb had tensed in fear, but hadn't moved, knowing a few others would protect him. He hadn't told the outlaws how Secka had tried to kill Zerone. They would most likely take Secka's side in that debate. Jeb had been content to leave them mad at Secka for bringing on the creatures' wrath. Nobody had said a word as they stared at the gray outlaw.

Blinking rapidly, Secka had started to stumble back to his den, then froze when his gaze locked on Jeb. "You..." His eyes had grown wide with shock, then narrowed in fury. Gritting his teeth, he had stalked toward him, then froze when Telku blocked him.

"Enough, Secka," Telku had snarled. "We know what you did. Leave Jeb alone!"

"Yeah, or the creatures will come!" Jati had snickered, sneering at the threat.

Secka's eyes had widened in fear and he had stumbled back, then froze and glared at Jeb with blazing gray eyes. "Why didn't those things eat you?" he had demanded.

Jeb had forced himself to meet his gaze. "I think they're on my side."

Secka had blinked in shock, then staggered back, his eyes wide with unease.

"Don't bother us again!" Jati had snickered. "Or the creatures will eat you!"

Blinking out of his thoughts, Jeb looked around at the sunny cavern and smiled. Grinning, he raced toward the basin to leap over the rocky crater. Looking up, he leapt up into the surface world. When he poked his head up on the bright upper world, he let out a gasp and froze. The creatures

he had been looking forward to seeing stood right in front of him, staring down at him with curious amber eyes. Their strange appearance sent a shiver down his spine, but he forcefully shook it off. A warm smile spread across his face when he realized they weren't *that* big and definitely not dangerous.

"Hi!" he exclaimed, letting a hint of excitement slip into his voice. "You're here!"

Meeting his gleaming eyes, Saderia couldn't help but smile and feel her worries start to fade. "Hi, Jeb." Sitting back, she tried to think of how to phrase her questions.

Jeb smiled. "So what's going on?"

Saderia hesitated. "Actually, Jeb, I need to talk to you about something."

He frowned uncertainly. "What? It's nothing bad, is it?"

"No, it's nothing bad," she said quickly. "It's just..." She hesitated for a long moment before taking a deep breath. "Look, this might sound really strange, but I have this power where I can see the future in Dreams."

Jeb's eyes widened in shock. "Really?"

Saderia blinked in surprise. "Y-yes," she continued, stunned that he was so quick to believe her. "What usually happens is I see things that come true in the future...unless I do something. Sometimes I also see the past, too, if it has something to do with the future."

Jeb's tail flicked in excitement. "Is it like the Sight Pond? That's what we call this big pond near Zerone's Court. Whenever there's trouble, the Emperor looks into the Pond to read signs. I think he sees the future or gets warnings to help him rule the Empire."

She blinked in amazement, stunned that the kraguers had their own supernatural forces. "Yes, it's a little bit like that." She paused. "Jeb, can I trust you to keep a secret?"

He nodded eagerly. "Of course. We're friends, aren't we?" He looked up at her with a smile, then paused, a look of unease spreading across his face. "I mean...are we?"

Saderia blinked and smiled after a hesitation. "Of course, Jeb. If you want to be."

A hopeful smile lit up his face. "Great! I haven't had a friend since..." He trailed off and the smile faded. "Never mind. Finish telling me

about your power thing.”

She frowned, wondering what he had been about to say. Shaking it off, she carefully began to explain her Dreams and her instinct and briefly talked about the prophecy, being careful to leave out any hints that he might be involved in it. She didn’t want to spring such an incredible revelation on him so soon after they had met.

“Wow,” he murmured when she had finished, his eyes wide with incredulity. “Can Dash do that, too? Or any of the other creatures like you?”

Dash gave Saderia a playful grin. “No, only Saderia’s special.”

She gave Dash a good-natured swat before facing Jeb. “Do you believe me?”

Jeb blinked in surprise. “Of course. How could you make that up?”

Saderia smiled. “Good point. Anyway, I just had a Dream that involved you.”

He stared up at her with round, stunned blue and green eyes. “Really?”

She hid a smile. “Yes. I’ve had Dreams about you before I met you actually.”

Jeb gaped in shock. He would have never guessed the creatures had magical powers, but after the tiger had saved him, he doubted she would lie to him. He felt a tingle of wonder when he thought about the things she might have done with her powers.

Saderia smiled at his shocked expression before melting back into seriousness. “Anyway, Jeb, I actually came here to talk to you about some of the things I saw in the Dreams and I’d like to ask you some questions.” She hesitated. “I want to know more about your past, but if you don’t want to tell us, I understand since you just met us.”

Jeb frowned in confusion. Why wouldn’t he tell them? Last night, they had saved his life twice, and both of them seemed nice. Now seemed as good a time as any. If what Saderia had said was true, maybe *she* could figure out the mystery that had haunted him.

He looked up at them with wide eyes. “Of course I’ll tell you. But... can you help me figure something out? I don’t really know what happened in my past anymore because of some of the things that have happened lately, but maybe you could help me.”

Saderia stared at him in amazement, stunned that he was so quick to trust them. Shaking it off, she smiled. "I'll help as best as I can. But you'll have to tell me a lot."

"Okay." Jeb started to speak, then paused in unease when he wondered if he was being too open with the creatures. "Um...what do you want to know?"

Saderia gave Jeb a reassuring smile, reading a hint of discomfort in his eyes. "Anything. I don't mind. Just let us know as much as you can."

Jeb stared at her in astonishment, remembering what she had said about being able to sense what others were feeling. "Well...I guess I'll start by telling you about Keruni and Zerone. Keruni, the Emperor's daughter, used to be my best friend. She's the one who started calling me Jeb. She was kind of snooty, she always relied on her 'Daddy' to protect her, and she believed his every word, which got annoying sometimes.

"When we played together, she was usually in charge. It went on like that for years with us playing in Zerone's Court, but later on—before the fire started—she started acting weird. Sometimes she had these weird scars that she said she got by getting snagged by branches, but they looked kind of like claw marks. That started happening right after Zerone announced he was going to marry a kraguer named Carita.

"Keruni's mother died when she was born, but back then, Zerone announced that Carita was going to be her stepmother. She wasn't happy about that. She told me that she tried to get her father to stop the wedding, but for once, her Daddy didn't listen to her. Keruni started acting really strange. She talked about doing something to get rid of Carita to stop the wedding. She would say weird things unprovoked—one time she told me she had matches at her mansion when we were talking about something entirely different. She would do a lot of weird things like that and I started to think she was crazy. I rarely saw her with Carita, but when I did, she looked terrified. I could never really figure out why.

"Later on, just a few days before Zerone and Carita's wedding, the fire started. My father and I got stuck in the fire and we tried to run, but while we were trying to escape, we found Zerone trapped under a tree branch. We pulled him out and got him out of the fire. I...I used to think I had seen him actually starting the fire, but maybe I just imagined that. Anyway, after the fire was put out, he turned around and told his Empire

that we had started the fire. We tried to prove ourselves innocent, but it was the Emperor's word against ours. We were ordered out of his Empire and cast out with the outlaws down in the Spring. Keruni even wanted to throw me out after Zerone accused us..."

He let out a long sigh. "I didn't see her a lot after the fire, but then nobody really did. She rarely came out of her house. After I was thrown out a few days after the fire, I kept believing it was Zerone who started the fire, but...I'm starting to suspect there was a specific reason it was started...I don't know if it was Zerone who did it anymore..."

Trailing off, he told them about his confrontations with Zerone and how he had learned that the blaze had taken Carita's life. Afterward, he explained how he had seen Keruni and how she acted so strange before snapping instantly back into her snobby self. When he finally finished, he sat back with a sigh. "So...what do you think?"

Saderia narrowed her eyes, thinking over everything she had heard. "I'm not sure yet. What do Keruni, Zerone, and Carita look like? And what do their voices sound like?"

Jeb shrugged. "Well, Keruni looks like me, but she has two green eyes. Her voice is high and she talks in a snobby voice. When she has one of those weird moments, it sounds like she's talking in her sleep. Zerone has green and gray eyes and his voice is low. I didn't see Carita often, but I know she had blue eyes. The few times I heard her talk, her voice sounded sweet, but there was this weird...sharp tone behind it."

Nodding absently, Saderia thought back to her strange Dreams. Her eyes darkened when she remembered an earlier Dream where she had seen three shadowed figures. The blue-eyed figure, Carita, had spoken so kindly to the scared green-eyed figure, Keruni, in front of Zerone, the shadow with gray and green eyes. The moment Zerone had left, Carita's sweet tone had turned cold. Hadn't Keruni accused Carita of 'trying to hurt her Daddy?' A dark chill swept over her. What had Keruni meant by that?

Another Dream flashed through her mind. Alone together in the woods, Keruni had spoken to a figure that had to be Jeb. Keruni had said she had to keep 'her' away, then hissed that Jeb wouldn't care if 'that psycho killed her and her Daddy.' Had she meant Carita? Shivers raced down her spine when she remembered seeing Keruni later watch a flame dancing in a fire pit. Her mesmerized look and her eerie words haunted her.

“Keruni said she didn’t remember the fire or Carita?” she murmured absently.

Jeb nodded. “I thought she was just messing with me at first, but...I actually think she’s serious. How could that be? How could she forget something so horrible?”

“I don’t know,” Saderia murmured, her eyes gazing far off into the distance.

Her latest Dream flickered through her mind. Jeb and Keruni had been sitting in the woods. Keruni had hissed about someone being evil and finding a way to get rid of her. She had to have meant Carita. Later, she had muttered something entirely different from what they had been talking about. She shivered when she recalled Jeb’s words.

*“Did you say you have matches in your room?”*

Her heart skipped as the last part flashed through her mind. Zerone and Keruni had sat outside the fire after escaping it. Her fur prickled when she remembered Keruni’s sobs. She had cried that she hadn’t *meant* to do it and wondered what would happen if ‘she’ was dead... A tiny snippet of their conversation burned in her mind.

*“Then it’s over. Just forget this. **Just forget all of it.** Everything will be all right.”*

Saderia’s eyes widened in shock when she remembered what Jeb had said about how Keruni always believed every word Zerone said. *Always.* Could it be?

“Jeb...have you ever wondered whether Keruni could have started the fire?”

Jeb’s eyes widened. “I...I had a passing thought, but I never really believed it. I thought it was crazy...” He stared up at her in shock. “Do *you* think she did it?”

Saderia frowned. “It makes sense in a sort of twisted way. It’s hard to believe she would actually forget all of it, but...I suppose it’s possible.” Thinking back to her Dreams, she murmured, “I think she wants to remember. If she *did* forget, whether or not she started the fire, I think she’s trying to remember. Maybe she wants to help you.”

Jeb stared at her in silence. Never in his wildest dreams had he truly believed Keruni was capable of starting the fire. But if Saderia thought it was true, maybe the idea wasn’t so far-fetched. “Maybe I need to talk to her



again,” he murmured distractedly. “I don’t know if it will do any good, but maybe she’ll remember more. But Zerone will kill me if he sees me.” His eyes widened in dismay. “Now I really need to talk to her!”

Saderia hesitated. “We could come with you. I hate to suggest this, but...we might be able to scare him into letting your disagreements... disappear for the moment.”

Dash stifled a tiny laugh and shrugged sheepishly when she glared at him.

Jeb frowned before slowly smiling a sly smile. “Maybe you could do that. You could wait outside while I talk to Zerone, and if he tries to kill me, I could call you.”

Saderia nodded thoughtfully. “That might work.”

He smiled a grateful smile. “Thanks. I just hope Keruni can help me this time.”

After an hour of walking, Jeb stepped out into a bright clearing with Saderia and Dash close behind him. A long brown stone laid across the ground, outlined by tiny sprigs of grass. Saderia and Dash stared at the huge stone in wonder and curiosity. Taking a deep breath, Jeb pushed against it. The rock slowly moved to the side with a low, rumbling noise, revealing a huge hole in the ground that led down into a dark, dirty room. Letting out a sigh, Jeb jumped down into the tiny room. Saderia and Dash leapt down behind him and stood beneath the stone that partially covered the hidden room. Looking around, they turned to see a long, narrow dirt tunnel on the side of the dirty wall.

“You can just stay here,” Jeb murmured. “I’ll come get you if I need you.”

The creatures nodded, their eyes locking on the tunnel. Taking a deep breath, Jeb forced himself to step forward, lean down, and creep into the tunnel. Following the long, winding dirt tunnel, he paused when he reached the end and stared out at Zerone’s Court. A long plaza spread out in front of him, covered in smooth, pale stones tinged with faint blue, purple, pink, and yellow colors. Small dens made out of rocks and twisting stalagmites lined the sides of the plaza, while other gnarled dens rose up behind them, spreading out in a wide colony of homes. A thick, damp

ceiling broken by roots hung over the entire Spring. Tiny droplets of water teetered on the ends of hanging stalactites.

An unlit, rocky fire pit sat in the center of the plaza. At the very end, a towering mansion rose up and brushed the damp ceiling. Gnarled stalagmites and stalactites rose up from the floor or swept down from the ceiling and twisted together to form the rough walls of the mansion. Gleaming black rocks had been packed behind them, forming the strong walls. Bright flowers had been woven into the twisting stalactites and stalagmites and rainbow-hued bushes wound around the palace, giving it a regal appearance. Dozens of kraguers sat around the plaza. The bright sound of conversation rose up in the clean, crisp air. Taking a deep breath, Jeb crouched down and crept across the plaza. Only when he reached the fire pit did he realize sneaking around only brought more attention to him. Straightening up, he looked around nervously, then froze when a booming roar echoed through the Court. Whirling around, he looked up just in time to see Zerone lunge toward him. Around the Court, the kraguers turned to stare at them with wide, intrigued eyes.

“What are *you* doing here?” Zerone snarled.

Jeb shrank back with a frightened shiver. “Zerone, I...I don’t want any trouble...”

“Then you should have stayed in your Spring,” he snarled, baring his fangs in a threatening growl. “I don’t know what you’re doing here, Jeb, and I don’t care. Get out!”

Jeb’s eyes grew wide with alarm and he staggered back a few paces. “B-but...”

“*Now!*” Zerone let out a furious roar. “Get out or I’ll rip your fur off!”

Jeb’s heart skipped when the Emperor drew back a huge paw. Shaking in terror, he choked out the first word that came to mind. “C-creatures!”

Zerone froze and blinked in surprise. “What?”

Jeb trembled with terror. “C-creatures,” he choked out. “They’re here.”

Zerone stared at him with stunned gray and green eyes. His paw dropped to the ground and he staggered back several paces, his expression twisting with fear. “*What?*”

Jeb gestured toward the tunnel. "They're out there. And they're on my side."

The Emperor blinked, then curled his lip in a sneer. "What's this about?"

"It's true," Jeb insisted, trying to hide his uncertainty. "I can show you."

Zerone snorted and raised an eyebrow in disbelief. Shaking his head, he let out an exasperated sigh. "Fine, go on then. Show me your imaginary creatures. After that, I can kick you out and kill you if I have time, so go on. But if this is an ambush, you're dead."

Jeb frowned in uncertainty. He slowly turned and padded across the plaza. The Emperor fell into step behind him with a bored look in his eyes. Ignoring the stares of the kraguers, Jeb paused when he reached the dirt tunnel. "They're in there," he murmured.

Zerone scoffed. Rolling his eyes, he pushed past Jeb and slipped into the tunnel, disappearing behind a wall of dirt. Sitting back, Jeb nervously waited for a sign to tell him to follow, feeling a tingle of guilt when he realized what was about to happen.

A loud, deafening roar of terror erupted from behind the tunnel, making all the kraguers whirl around to stare in shock. Feeling his fur prickle, Jeb instantly wriggled into the tunnel, taking it as his cue to join the Emperor. Picking his way frantically through the tunnel, he stumbled into the dirt room. Saderia and Dash sat in front of him, staring quizzically at a corner. Huddled against the wall and shaking with fear was the Emperor.

Zerone stared at the creatures with wide, terrified eyes. "C-c-creatures..."

Jeb winced with guilt. Stepping forward, he let out a soft sigh. "It's okay," he murmured. "They're nice and they won't hurt you. They're my friends."

Zerone gaped at him in horror. "What kind of sick trick is this?"

Jeb sighed. "It's not a trick. The creatures are nice...or at least these two are."

Saderia glanced down at the quivering kraguer in sympathy. "We promise we won't hurt you unless you attack Jeb first," she promised with a kind nod.

Zerone stared up at her with wide, guarded eyes. Still shivering in terror, he forced himself to stand up straighter and hide the fear in his eyes. Gritting his teeth, he glanced at the creatures for a long, uneasy moment. "I don't believe this..."

Saderia let out a sigh. Sitting back, she explained how she had met Jeb. Giving him an apologetic look, she insisted that they only wanted to make sure Jeb was safe. By the time she had finished, Zerone had forced himself to stand straighter. "Well...this is interesting." He curled his lip at Jeb. "So this cretin has told you everything?"

Saderia frowned at his harsh words. "Well...yes, Jeb has filled us in."

Zerone let out a long sigh. "Then what do you want?"

Jeb looked up at him quickly, his eyes wide with hope. "I have to talk to Keruni."

Zerone glared at him and gritted his teeth in fury. "Absolutely not."

"Why not?" Jeb snapped, flattening his ears. "Scared she'll remember this time?"

A low growl rumbled in his throat. "You have a knack for getting on my nerves."

Saderia took an anxious step forward. "Emperor Zerone, with all due respect...he is entitled to know what happened. Considering he was framed for the fire, he at least has a right to know the truth. It's in the past anyway. What does it matter if he knows now?"

"I'm not going to harass her or upset her," Jeb murmured, his tail drooping. "I'll just ask her if she remembers anything, and if she doesn't, I'll leave. How about that?"

Zerone gritted his teeth, his eyes blazing. "Who do you think you are? I know why you brought these creatures with you." He let out a weary sigh, the fire dying from his eyes. "This is getting ridiculous. Fine, you'll get your one question, Jeb, but if she doesn't remember anything about that miserable fire, then leave and never *ever* come back. That's final. And if you think you can threaten me with freaks of nature, you're dreaming."

Saderia let out a soft sigh, feeling a tingle of guilt. "We didn't come just to intimidate you. We wanted to make sure Jeb didn't get hurt. It's not like I don't understand why you're upset. I know it must be hard for you and your daughter."

Zerone let out a long breath. "Fine. Jeb, come with me. Creatures, you stay here." Without another word, he disappearing into the tunnel, his tail drooping with exhaustion.

Jeb winced at his defeated tone. After a long hesitation, he slowly followed him and crept out into the plaza. Falling into step beside Zerone, he let the Emperor lead him toward the mansion. A twinge of guilt stung him when he saw the dull look in his eyes. "Zerone..." He glanced nervously at his paws. "I...I'm sorry it got out of hand this way."

"I've decided I don't care anymore," Zerone growled curtly, not bothering to look at him. "We might as well get it over with. I somehow doubt you're going to find anything out anyway. You've already hurt Keruni by encouraging her to remember, so it's not like asking her will do any more damage than what you've already done."

Jeb winced. "I'm sorry, Zerone."

The Emperor didn't respond. Stalking forward, he ignored the curious stares of the kraguers in his Court and led Jeb toward the enormous mansion. The tall, twisting stalagmites rose up in front of them, casting a dark, eerie shadow over the colorful plaza. Wilted flowers were woven in right beside bright, blooming ones, making Jeb shiver. Zerone gestured to a hole in the wall framed by two thick, twisting stalagmites.

Taking a deep breath, Jeb padded into the wide room of Zerone's mansion. Pale rocks lined the floor while intimidating stone walls rose up hundreds of feet, covered in stalactites and stalagmites. Moss and flowers covered the walls. At the very back of the room, several stalactites reached down toward the floor and tangled together to form a rough, grass-covered throne. Hidden in the shadows on the right wall were smooth, gray rocks stacked on top of each other to form a cracked staircase to the upper floor.

Pushing Jeb farther into the main room of his mansion, Zerone stalked forward with a stony glare. Before he could call Keruni, a loud shriek suddenly erupted from the upper floor. Whirling around, Jeb and Zerone stared in shock as Keruni stumbled down the stairs, nearly tripping. Her green eyes were wide with horror and tears stung her eyes.

"Daddy! I remember!" she sobbed. "I didn't mean to! I...I remember it all!"

Zerone stared at Keruni with narrowed, pain-filled eyes for what seemed like ages. After a long moment, he cut his eyes at Jeb and let out a

long sigh. “Keruni...talk to Jeb about what you remember. I’m going to go out into the plaza and leave you here with him. I’ll talk to you when you’re done. There’s...really no sense hiding this anymore.”

Keruni whirled around to stare at Jeb in surprise. “What is he doing here?”

“I’ll explain later.” Zerone heaved a heavy sigh. “Right now, you probably want to talk to him. That’s the whole reason you tried to remember, right?”

Keruni hesitated, then nodded shakily.

Zerone took a deep breath and watched her for a moment longer before slowly turning around. Letting his tail drag against the ground in defeat, he slunk out of the mansion and disappeared behind the dark, rocky wall, leaving them alone in silence.

Jeb faced her uneasily. “Keruni? You...you remember what happened now?”

Keruni squeezed her eyes shut and shivered. “I’m a murderer.”

The fur along Jeb’s back rose up in alarm. “Wh-what do you mean by that?”

Keruni wiped away a teardrop. “It was an accident. I swear, Jeb! I never meant for it to get like that! I...I didn’t know the fire would spread so fast!”

Jeb’s claws unsheathed in alarm, but a strong sense of curiosity rose over the fear. “It...it’s okay, Keruni. Just tell me what happened.”

Keruni stared at her paws, blinking rapidly to push away the tears. After a long moment of silence, she took a deep breath. “You remember Carita, right? About a year ago, she was going to marry Daddy. I was so scared of her...remember?” When Jeb nodded, she curled her lip. “It was all a lie. Carita was evil. She was planning on marrying Daddy *only* because it would make *her* the Empress. After she married him, she...she was planning on *killing* him and me, so that she could be the only ruler.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I tried to tell Daddy, but he never listened. Carita always acted so sweet around him and she always pretended to care about me, but the minute Daddy was out of earshot, she would warn me not to tell him about her sick plan. When I tried to protest, she scratched me and told me to say I had gotten the scars from running into a tree.”

She shuddered and a tear slipped down her face. Opening her eyes, she faced him with wide, miserable green eyes. "Daddy wouldn't believe me no matter what I did and he was going to marry her soon. As soon as they were married, she was going to *kill* him! I didn't know what to do!" She shook her head bitterly. "Everyone in the Empire thought I was crazy! I couldn't eat or sleep or think or speak! All I could think about was how she was going to hurt him! I felt so helpless and nobody would believe me! I *had* to do *something*, Jeb! If she had lived to marry Daddy, he would be dead and so would I!"

Jeb stared at her with wide, stunned blue and green eyes. Could it really be true?

"I didn't know what to do," Keruni choked out. "But I...I had those matches hidden up in my room. I stole them from the fire pit long before then...Fire always seemed so pretty." Her eyes glimmered with guilt. "I swear I only wanted to make a big enough fire to scare her off! I just wanted to start it, then put it out and tell Carita I had done it to make her leave! But...but the fire spread so *fast* and all of a sudden the whole forest caught fire! I couldn't control it! I...I thought I was going to die, but Daddy saved me, but..." She broke off and squeezed her eyes shut. "It killed Carita." Wincing in pain, she rapidly shook her head. "I'm so glad she's dead, Jeb, but I never wanted to be a murderer. I never wanted to hurt so many animals. All I wanted was to save my Dad!"

Jeb stared at her in horror. His mind whirled with shock and he almost couldn't believe Keruni had actually lit the fire. Part of him wanted to sympathize with his old friend, but another part of him couldn't help but feel horrified. The roaring fire had nearly destroyed the entire forest. Innocent lives had been lost. "So...Zerone knew you started the fire?" Jeb choked out, speaking the only coherent thought he could think of.

Keruni nodded miserably. "I thought he would hate me for it. He never believed me about Carita, so I thought he would throw me out...as a killer. I...I couldn't live if Daddy hated me." She blinked rapidly. "But...when he saved me from the fire, he told me he had found a few pieces of paper in Carita's den that had a plan for how to become the Empress of the Court written out on it. Most of the papers were singed like she had tried to destroy them, but he could still make out a few words that told him she was planning a murder. After that, he found a will he had never written that left

the mansion, the Court, and the forest to Carita. He realized that Carita must have forged his handwriting.” She let out a trembling sigh. “Only then did he realize I was actually telling the truth, but Carita was already dead. When Daddy rescued me, he told me he knew the truth, but that he didn’t want to talk about it. He...he didn’t want me to get in trouble, so he *had* to frame you, Jeb. That was his only option. He wasn’t saving himself. He was saving me.”

Jeb gaped at her in shock. His mind whirled with wonder at everything he had been told and he felt almost faint at finally learning the truth. “Did you actually forget all of this?” he choked out. “How...how could you have forgotten something so horrible?”

Keruni shrugged and looked dismally down at her paws. “I don’t know. Daddy told me to forget it, so I did. I *had* to forget it. I don’t know how. I just pretended it never happened and went along with each day like it was normal, and after a few weeks had passed, I managed to convince myself that everything *was* normal. I don’t know. I just know I didn’t want to remember anything.” A weak, painful smile spread across her face. “I’m actually glad I did remember now, though. You deserve an explanation. And if you want to tell the Empire, go ahead. I don’t blame you.” She heaved a heavy sigh. “But if you don’t, maybe things will finally be normal. I am sorry, Jeb, for everything I caused.”

Jeb stayed silent for a tense moment. After a long hesitation, he stepped toward her and rested his tail on her shoulder. “It’s okay, Keruni. I won’t tell. I’m sorry, too.”



# Chapter Twenty-Three

## Nighttime Meeting

“Where have you been?”

The sharp, icy voice made Saderia look up and blink in surprise when she saw her mother glaring down at her. Pausing in the entrance to the den, she shared a secret look with Dash. Under the guise of exploring, they had gone to ask Jeb what he had found out yesterday at the Emperor’s Court.

“Well?” Saderia looked back to see her mother narrowing her eyes and lashing her tail furiously back and forth. “Where have you been and what have you been doing?”

She stared up at her mother in shock. Only a few hours ago, she had woken up and crept out of her room with Dash close beside her. Her mother had been sitting tiredly at the rocky table and had looked up at them with her dull, lifeless eyes when Saderia had told her they wanted to go exploring. The Queen had nodded silently before gazing at the food in her paws, while Saderia and Dash backed out of the den without another word.

Staring up into Karenisha’s eyes, she frowned in confusion and unease. “We were exploring. We told you just this morning, Mom. We’ve only been gone for a few hours.”

The Queen narrowed her eyes. “In those few hours, you could have died.”

Saderia flattened her ears. “That’s an exaggeration! Nothing happened to us.”

She flicked her tail sharply. “Something could have.”

“But it didn’t.” She narrowed her eyes, feeling a tingle of fear and worry when she saw the dull, faraway look hiding behind the fury burning in her mother’s eyes.

Her mother curled her lip. “You think you’re so safe and protected? You think everything is just fine? That’s a lie! What about what happened

to...?” She let the sentence trail off and looked away from them, her eyes flashing with pain and grief.

Saderia blinked as a sudden feeling of alarm swept over her. Gaping in shock, she suddenly realized how long her father had been gone—one week and six days. Her heart skipped with panic and the longing to do something, but before she could speak or move, a tense calm drifted over her, pushing away the alarm. An instinct told her to *wait*. Even though she wanted to do something about Makero’s absence, a tiny voice whispered *not yet*. The calming thought filled her with a warm sense of peace even though she felt a pang of fear when she realized she had no idea what she was supposed to wait for.

Shaking off her worries, she tried to tell herself Makero’s long absence was a good thing. When he had left, he had told her it might take two weeks to fully explore the forest and return if the hunters were gone. Considering how much time had passed, she couldn’t help but hope they had left, giving Makero much more to investigate. Pushing away the thoughts, she glanced up at her mother and tried not to wince. Karenisha’s ragged fur hung limply off her skinny sides. Her tail was a snarled mess. Her once bright, shining amber eyes had faded into a dull, murky color devoid of any signs of life.

A shiver traveled through her body. “You still think Dad is...” She trailed off.

Pain flashed in Karenisha’s eyes. “Just don’t go out without permission again.”

Saderia frowned. “But...Mom, we *did* have your permission. Remember?”

Karenisha looked away. “Why don’t you two just get to bed? Get some rest.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes uneasily. “But it’s *early*. It’s just past noon.”

Karenisha blinked in confusion, her eyes wide with uncertainty and bewilderment. Standing helplessly in the entrance to the den with such a gaunt, disheveled appearance, she suddenly looked lost and alone. Shaking herself, she tried to blink the confusion out of her gaze. “Oh...Well, then you can go exploring if you want. I know you like to do that.”

Saderia frowned, feeling a shiver of disquiet. “We just went exploring, Mom.”

Karenisha stared down at her in misunderstanding. A tiny hint of fear flickered through her wide amber eyes before she shook her head and gave them a haunting, empty smile. “Right. Well, eat some food then. You must be hungry after all that walking.”

Saderia sat back and faced her sternly. “All right, we will. After you.”

Karenisha flicked her tail carelessly across the ground. “I already ate.”

Frowning, Saderia exchanged a nervous glance with Dash. Turning away, Dash looked up at Karenisha and narrowed his eyes. “Karenisha, why are you lying to us?”

She blinked in surprise, then bristled. “What makes you think I would lie to you?”

Exchanging a glance, Saderia and Dash gazed silently up at her with uneasy eyes.

“Karenisha.” The three looked up at the sound of the timid but stern voice and Saderia felt a rush of relief when she saw her uncle step out of his room and narrow his eyes in concern. “You *haven’t* eaten and I think it’s time you did. Come on. The food is still fresh.”

She bitterly turned away from him and lashed her tail. “I’m not hungry.”

“You haven’t eaten all morning.” Uncle Jash narrowed his eyes in confusion and carefully stepped forward to pick an apple off the table. “You must be a bit hungry.”

Gritting her teeth, she whirled around to glare at him. “I’m not a child, Jash. I know when I’m hungry and when I’m not.”

“Karenisha, you’ve been undernourished just like the rest of us since we got here. We have a lot of food now. You should eat.”

She lashed her tail. “I said I’m not hungry. Leave me alone.”

Uncle Jash narrowed his eyes. “You can’t just starve yourself because you think...” He trailed off uncomfortably and looked nervously down at his paws.

Fury blazed in Karenisha’s eyes. “Just because I *think* Makero’s dead? I don’t *think* anything, I *know*!” She shook her head furiously. “Why

don't any of you listen? Is it just because you don't want to believe me? Am I the only one who can see the truth?"

Uncle Jash took a step back in alarm. "Karenisha, you've got no real proof."

Karenisha let out a low growl. "Fine, have it your way! But what will you say when two weeks are up, Jash? What will you say in two days when he doesn't return?"

Saderia took a step forward and narrowed her eyes. "Dad *will* return."

Karenisha looked back at her with eyes narrowed in pain and defeat. A jolt of fear shivered down Saderia's spine. How could this lifeless stranger be her mother?

Draping his tail over Saderia's shoulder, Dash looked around. "Where's Cia?"

Gritting her teeth, Karenisha opened her mouth to snap at him, then paused, her eyes suddenly growing wide and distant with despair. "I...I don't know..."

Uncle Jash frowned in confusion. "She said she was going to check on the flood barricade at the Home of the Leopards. She told us and left this morning. Remember?"

Karenisha stood silently, her eyes growing dark and cold. "Another disaster? Somehow I'm not surprised. This place is a deathtrap. Everything's been against us ever since those horrible hunters came. Were we just meant to die out? Is that why we began this descent into destruction?" Turning away from them, she bit her lip and squeezed her eyes shut. "There was probably a flood! We've probably lost another family member!"

Uncle Jash's eyes widened in alarm and he cautiously stepped forward to rest a paw gently on her shoulder, then let out a yelp when Karenisha shoved him away with a vicious hiss. "I don't need your comfort! I need to get out of this forest!" A wild gleam lit up her blazing eyes. "Matter of fact, that's it! We're leaving the forest! I'm not living here any longer to wait for some other calamity! We have to find somewhere else to live!"

Saderia's eyes widened in shock and horror. "*What?*" She gaped at her mother in dismay. "Mom, things are finally getting *better*! Leaving now

would be stupid!”

The Queen lashed her tail fiercely. “I’m not going to live in a place so bad we have to send animals on a long, painful journey to a dangerous place we used to call home just to see if we can go back! We should find somewhere else to settle!”

Saderia slapped her tail against the ground. “Mom, Dad only left because it’s *likely* the hunters are gone by now and everyone would like their home back! But even if the hunters are still there, we’ve finally started to adapt. We can’t leave now!”

Karenisha’s eyes blazed with fury and fear. “If we stay here, we’re doomed!”

Dash flicked his tail nervously and looked up to meet her gaze. “Karenisha, calm down. I know you’re upset, but we can’t just leave. No one’s *going* to leave.”

Karenisha opened her mouth to snap back at him, then trailed off with a defeated hiss. “Fine,” she muttered. “I can see that you’re all against me. Fine. But remember that I *tried* to help you when some other horrible thing happens to tear us all apart.”

Uncle Jash heaved a long sigh. “Karenisha, things are going to be fine. We can talk about moving when Makero gets back.”

Fury burned in her eyes. “When Makero gets back? Are you that *dense*, Jash?”

“Karenisha! Not in front of the kids!”

The four of them whipped around at the sound of the sharp voice to see Cia standing behind Saderia and Dash in the entrance. Her blue eyes gleamed with fury as she pushed past them and stormed into the house. “What is going on?”

Ignoring her, Karenisha stared at her with wide, relieved eyes. “You’re alive.”

Cia lashed her tail. “Of course I’m alive. There was only a minor leak in the flood barricade,” she snapped. “I told you I might be gone for a while.”

Karenisha looked down. “This forest could have done much worse to you.”

“But it didn’t.” Cia frowned. “Calm down. Let’s not start this in front of the kids.”

Karenisha narrowed her eyes. "You all make me sick. What are we supposed to do, let them wait for years until they finally realize their father's *not* coming back? By that time, this forest will probably have killed off all of us! Do you want to leave them hoping in vain until someone finally tells them 'Sorry, Makero's dead'?"

"Enough!" Cia snapped. "We'll tell them when we know it's true. Right now, it's highly, *highly* likely that he will return."

She gritted her teeth in fury. "It's been a week and six days!"

"Makero said he might be gone for two weeks or even more if he had to explore the forest," Cia snapped back. "Unless I'm mistaken, it has not yet been two weeks."

Karenisha gaped at her in disbelief. "This is insane! It's close enough!"

"No, it's not." Cia narrowed her eyes. "Unless we see a body, Makero is alive."

"I've already seen the body!" she shouted. "The hunters took it!"

Cia let out a heavy sigh. "Karenisha, you only saw it in a Dream. Dreams are always hypothetical. You told me that a long time ago. You're *here*, not with Makero."

Karenisha narrowed her eyes in a mutinous glare, but didn't say a word.

Cia took a step forward and gently rested her tail on her shoulder. "Why don't you go get something to eat, then go rest? Maybe you'll feel calmer. Right now, I've got to go check on something else related to the disasters, but I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Fine," Karenisha spat. "Just don't tell me about it when you get back! I don't want to hear about all the others who have died." Gritting her teeth, she turned and stormed back to her room. A loud thud sounded from her room when she flopped down on her rocky bed. Cia let out a soft sigh and closed her eyes for a long moment.

Saderia looked up with wide, stunned eyes. "Cia...What happened to her?"

Cia took a deep breath. "Ever since she had that Dream, she's just been getting worse. I think she's just getting more and more confused. I think she wants to believe Makero's alive, but she can't make herself think he is." She sighed. "I think he's fine, so don't worry about it. But your

mother's getting confused and upset. She's been forgetting things a lot. Do you notice how she looks so lost? Sometimes she forgets what you told her because she's thinking about Makero and her Dream. It's starting to worry me..."

Saderia narrowed her eyes uneasily. "She thinks we're all going to die out."

Cia let out a long sigh. "Yes, I've heard her say it. Her Dream seems to have weakened her a lot. All the times she felt like giving up with everything she's faced are finally starting to catch up to her. This forest is dangerous, so I can't blame her, but it's like she sees danger around every corner. I've heard her talking about leaving before."

Worry gleamed in Saderia's amber eyes. "She was just talking about leaving. You don't think she'll try it, do you?"

Cia hesitated for a long moment before giving a soft shake of her head. "I doubt she'll leave without you, Saderia. But...Karenisha's just so different lately, and it is stressful. Hopefully, she'll get better soon... I mean, it was just a dream even if it was one of her special Dreams. Perhaps Makero will return soon and Karenisha will be okay."

Saderia frowned. "What exactly was her Dream about?"

Cia shrugged. "You'll have to ask her. She won't tell me much. I don't think she trusts me." Her eyes gleamed with sadness. After a long moment, she pushed past them and crept toward the woods. "Look after her while I'm gone!" she called.

Watching Cia, Uncle Jash helplessly padded toward his room. When he disappeared, Saderia let out a long sigh. Her heart burned with the desire to understand her mother's Dream. Somehow she had to help her mother out of her miserable state.

"I'm going to go talk to Mom about her Dream," she murmured, glancing over at Dash. "I just...I have to know. Can you wait in my room?"

He rested his tail gently on her shoulder. "Sure. Just try not to get too upset with her. Dreams have upset you too. Try to be sympathetic."

She let out a soft sigh. "I'll try, but you're better at that than I am."

He shrugged and gave her a sympathetic smile before slowly padding away. His eyes lingered on Karenisha's room and worry flashed in his amber irises. Turning away from him, Saderia took a deep breath and

stepped toward her mother's room. Peeking into the room, she reluctantly stepped forward to stand in front of her mother's bed.

"Mom?" She waited for a long moment and heaved a sigh when Karenisha didn't turn around or respond. Raising her voice, she called, "Mom!"

The Queen let out a long, tired sigh and slowly turned around to face her. "What do you want?" she muttered. "To call me a liar or something of that nature?"

Saderia let out a long sigh, feeling a tingle of guilt. "I'm sorry, Mom. Maybe we are too hard on you. But I just get scared when you start acting like this."

Karenisha narrowed her eyes and looked down at the ground. "Life is scary."

Saderia took a deep breath. "I know. But I...I still don't believe it and I have to know what you saw. Can you tell me about your Dream? Just so I can try to understand?"

Karenisha looked at her for a long moment, her tired, lifeless eyes boring into Saderia's. After a long moment, she finally let out a long, slow sigh. "I admit the Dream was hazy, but I could still see. I...I saw a wide, open piece of land..."

She pricked her ears. "Was it the desert? Or was it a clearing in the forest?"

The Queen shook her head. "I don't see details like you, Saderia. I don't know if it was day or night, past or future, or desert or forest. I couldn't tell if it was sand or grass. I didn't see any trees, so it could be a wide clearing or the desert. It doesn't matter where exactly it was anyway. After the Dream started, I saw your father..."

"How did you know it was Dad?"

Karenisha frowned. "I'm not sure. I saw a figure big enough to be him, but it was really hazy in my Dream. I think I might have seen green eyes, but I'm not sure. I didn't need to actually see him to know it was him, though. I could just tell."

Saderia frowned and flicked her tail. "Mom, that's not very accurate..."

Her eyes flashed. "You're telling me that if you had a Dream about Dash, you wouldn't know it was him just by your own senses? That if there



was no other way to know it was him, you wouldn't be able to instinctively realize it was your best friend?"

Saderia sighed, knowing arguing was useless when it was true. "All right. Go on."

Karenisha narrowed her eyes in thought. "I saw Makero and...I think he might have been afraid. He was running, I think. He had to be. Yes, that's what happened... He was running and I saw these big monsters coming after him and I could sense they were hunters. They were very hazy and blurry, but I still knew it was them." She hesitated and her eyes grew dark. "After that, I heard a noise and it must have been from the hunters..."

Saderia looked up sharply. "You heard a gunshot?"

Karenisha frowned. "It wasn't like the ones we heard in our old forest. It didn't make a loud sound, but it still made some sort of noise. After that, Makero fell and..." Her eyes grew distant and clouded. "I just knew something horrible had happened..."

Saderia took a deep breath. "Mom, if you just saw him fall, how do you know he was dead? If it didn't sound like the other gunshots, then it could have been something else. Even if it was, Cia got shot, too, and she survived, or it could have missed..."

A low growl rumbled in Karenisha's throat. "You don't understand! You weren't there!" She lashed her tail. "I saw him lying on the ground and I knew he was dead. I could feel it. The hunters always mean death. It's the only conclusion. I...I didn't want to believe it at first, but it has to be the truth. Dreams always come true."

"But there might be another conclusion..."

Karenisha glared at her with burning eyes. "You don't understand! You didn't feel the kind of pain I did in that Dream! You have no idea what it feels like!"

Saderia gaped at her in shock. "What?" Fury rose in her chest, making her heart burn with pain. Her amber eyes flamed with anger. "How dare you? Do you know what I've gone through? Just a few months ago I had to leave my friend behind to be ripped apart! Just a few days ago, I had to stand by and watch my best friend lay in agony for hours waiting to die! Have you ever had to watch someone close to you die just to save your worthless life? Have you ever had your closest friend beg you not to give

up after they're dead? Do you have any idea what that's like? Do you know how it destroys you?"

Karenisha froze. "Saderia...Wait a minute..."

"You have no idea!" she hissed. "Keep your stupid ideas about your stupid Dream! Keep sulking about those few painful scenes you saw in your head! It is *nothing* compared to the agony you suffer when it happens in real life." Whirling around, she raced out of the room as fast as she could, diving into her room and lunging onto the bed.

Dash jumped in surprise. "Saderia? What's wrong? What happened?"

Saderia shook her head and buried her face in her paw, feeling tears sting her eyes and betrayal pierce her heart. Her mother's words burned in her mind.

Dash rested his paw on her back. "Saderia? Are you okay? What did she say?"

Saderia looked at him out of the corner of her eye, then looked down at her paws. She had almost lost everything over the past few months. Somehow she had managed to fight the challenges, but now she realized she was starting to lose something else.

"What happened to my Mom?" she whispered. "I want my Mom back."

The dying rays of the setting sun shimmered through the forest. Saderia looked up to see her den rising up in front of her and padded closer with Dash beside her. A small glimmer of happiness glowed in her heart when she remembered talking to Jeb just a few hours ago about her forest. The glimmer of wonder that had sparked in his eyes when she had told him about her beautiful forest without disasters or strange plants made her grin, but she still felt a dark feeling of unease. She had held off on telling him how she suspected he might be part of the prophecy. He still seemed terrified of the lands beyond his forest and she didn't want to tell him because he might think he would have to travel away from his home the same way she had. Even though she didn't want to scare him, she couldn't help but wonder when she *was* going to tell him and how he might react.

Shaking the thoughts away, she looked up at the den and couldn't help but feel a jolt of unease. Her mother would be waiting for them inside,

but how would she look? Would her fur still look dirty and her eyes absent and lifeless? Taking a deep breath, she padded into the den with Dash close beside her and stepped into the entrance.

“Karenisha!” The two of them looked up in surprise at the sound of Cia’s sharp voice. Cia stood in front of the rocky table, glaring at Karenisha, who stood bristling just a few feet away. Sitting at the table, Uncle Jash watched with wide, uneasy blue eyes.

Cia let out a sharp hiss. “No one’s going anywhere! It’s too risky.”

Karenisha lashed her tail and glared at her sister. “I’m not going to sit here in this stupid forest and wait for it to kill us off! We have to leave!”

Cia sighed. “Karenisha, we all want to leave, but we can’t for a lot of reasons. One, we have nowhere to go. Two, not everyone is healthy enough to travel. Three, the hunters may not be gone from our old home yet, and finding another new home is close to impossible. And four, we have to wait for Makero. Until he returns, we’re staying here.”

Karenisha’s eyes blazed with fury. “You *idiots!* All those reasons are meaningless! One, we didn’t know where we were going when we came here, did we?”

“And look where that got us.” Uncle Jash narrowed his eyes and looked up to face her uncertainly. “Besides, that was an emergency situation.”

She gaped at him in disbelief. “And this isn’t?”

Cia flicked her tail. “It’s not an immediate emergency.”

Karenisha let out a humorless chuckle. “*Oh*, not an *immediate* emergency! We’ve had floods, geysers, pitfalls, and an entire epidemic in the space of six months! What’s an immediate emergency, Cia? Would it be an immediate emergency if all the animals who have lost their lives died all at the same time?” She let out a furious hiss. “As for the rest of your stupid reasons... *Two*, if some animals aren’t healthy enough to travel, what makes you think they can survive here? *Three*, the hunters will probably never leave, so we have to find somewhere else no matter how difficult. And four, Makero is dead!”

Anger burned in Saderia’s chest. “You don’t know that! You didn’t see his body!”

Karenisha whipped around and narrowed her eyes. “Did you see Dingo’s body?”

Saderia froze, a violent shiver racing down her spine. The den fell silent as pain exploded in her chest. She stared at her in horror, her eyes wide with betrayal and pain.

*“That was uncalled for!”*

Blinking in surprise, she glanced up at Dash in shock. His fur bristled in fury and his amber eyes gleamed with rage as he glared at Karenisha. A low snarl rose in his throat. “What kind of mother are you? Do you even care if you hurt your daughter?”

Karenisha hissed. “So *you* are going to tell me what a mother should be like?”

Dash gritted his teeth. “At least I know what a mother shouldn’t be. If you’re supposed to have powers, why can’t you sense the pain you’re causing Saderia?”

Her eyes flamed with fury. “How dare you, you ungrateful—” Breaking off in a hiss, she swiped a claw at him and snagged his ear before stalking away with a low growl.

Cia’s eyes widened in shock. “What is happening to our family?” Before anyone could speak, she raced out of the house into the woods. Jumping to his paws, Uncle Jash chased after her with stunned blue eyes, as if he could hardly believe what had happened.

Silence filled the den.

Pressing a paw to his torn, bloody ear, Dash looked uncomfortably down at his paws before turning to Saderia with wide, apologetic eyes. “I... I’m sorry...”

“Don’t be.” Saderia held up a paw, her eyes distant. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Dash shuffled his paws nervously. “But I shouldn’t have said...”

“It’s all right,” she murmured, slowly padding to her room. Her mind whirled with sorrow and wonder. Dash frowned and cautiously followed her. Looking uneasy, he leapt onto the bed beside her and watched as she gazed into the distance with wide eyes.

Saderia was silent for a long moment. “She’s right, you know.”

“Karenisha?” Dash frowned in confusion and faced her nervously. “About what?”

She looked up at him slowly, her amber eyes guarded and narrowed. “We never did see Dingo’s body. We just ran and heard him howl and that

was it.”

Dash wrapped his paw tightly around Saderia’s. “Saderia, don’t do this.”

She flicked him sharply with her tail. “Well, look at us, sitting here and criticizing Mom when all this time we never went back to look for Dingo’s body.” A shiver raced down her spine. “I didn’t want to look for him. I was scared and guilty and...What if...”

He squeezed her paw tightly and shook his head. “Saderia, don’t say it...”

She narrowed her eyes and met his worried expression. “What if he’s not dead?”

Dash sighed. “Saderia, let’s not go there. It’s just going to cause you more pain.”

She lashed her tail sharply back and forth. “Well, isn’t it possible?”

He let out a soft groan. “I suppose there is a very *slight* possibility, but...”

Her eyes lit up with wonder. “Then he could be out there somewhere!”

Dash stared at her with pleading eyes. “Saderia, please don’t do this. There were eight of them. The chances of him getting out alive are slim to none. If he was out there, wouldn’t you know by now anyway, either through Dreams or him finding us?”

Saderia let out a sigh and buried her face in her paws, her heart aching with pain. “Dash, I’m not sure of anything anymore! I don’t know if the dead are living or if the living are dead. I don’t know why forests pop up out of nowhere with mutants inhabiting them or why hunters had to invade our forest. Why does nothing make sense anymore?”

Dash stared down at his paws. “I don’t know, but things haven’t made sense in a long time. Do you think your Dreams might help?”

Saderia let out a quiet sigh and stared at the bland, rocky wall. “I sure hope so.”

Vast, open land stretched out as far as the eye could see. Burning sunlight beat down on the sandy hills, making the air seem blurry and hazy. Silence filled the air. Looking around nervously, Saderia started to step onto the hot sand, then froze in shock. A deafening roar split the air. Looking

around wildly, she stumbled backwards, her heart beating frantically with fear. Loud shouts boomed out from behind a dune of sand, dripping with excitement. The booming thud of paws pounding against the ground made the whole scene seem to tremble. She let out a cry of horror when a sand dune burst apart and a large, orange figure leapt out. Green eyes flashed in the glinting light of the sun as the figure slammed against the ground and darted away as fast as his legs could carry him.

Saderia felt her breath catch in her throat when a horde of eerie, shadowed figures chased after the orange figure on two legs, shouting and yelling. The screams of the figures and the pounding of the feet against the ground echoed in her ears. A tiny popping noise sounded just above the clamor of shouts and paw steps. Before her eyes, the orange figure let out an earsplitting roar and stumbled forward. Blackness swept over her just as the figure collapsed to the ground, surrounded by the dark, cackling shadows.

Saderia's eyes shot open and she jolted upward in bed. Gasping, she looked around with wild, terrified eyes and felt her breath catch when she realized she was back in her room. Her heart skipped as the Dream flashed through her mind. Pushing the thoughts away, she let out a shaky sigh and tried to calm the wild beating of her heart.

"Saderia?"

A jolt of fear raced through her body. Looking up rapidly, she felt relief wash over her when she saw Dash staring at her with a confused, worried expression.

She took in a shaky breath of air. "Something's happened."

He blinked at her in surprise. "What is it? What happened?"

She shook her head fearfully, her eyes wide with alarm. "Dad..."

His eyes opened wide and he instantly sat up. "You had a Dream about Makero?"

She took a deep breath. "I...I think so..." Her mind whirled with panic. The scene in her Dream seemed straightforward, but she forced herself to remember that Dreams were anything but clear. She couldn't jump to conclusions after what she had seen.

Had the Dream taken place in the future, present, or past? Alarm shivered up her spine when she realized there wasn't a clue in her Dream to

tell her. Knowing *when* it had happened was of deathly importance. If it was in the present or past, it was too late. Hissing fearfully, she desperately turned to Dash to tell him what she had seen. An eerie, tense calm settled over her as she explained and a strange instinct whispered for her to *wait* before she jumped to conclusions. Her heart raced with panic, but the odd calmness forced her to relax and feel a rush of frustration. Was there something she hadn't thought of to save her father? Was there some other convoluted step she had to do first? What?

Dash gaped in horror when she fell silent. "You mean...Karenisha was right?!"

"I don't know!" she snapped. "I mean, I'm supposed to, I guess. But I don't know if it's happened already or..." A low growl rose in her throat. "This stupid instinct keeps telling me to wait before I try to stop this! How am I supposed to wait after that Dream?"

"I...I don't know," he stammered. "But that Dream seems pretty clear..."

Saderia let out a long sigh. "I know, but that instinct won't go away. There must be something I'm missing. But I want to do something *now*!"

He flicked his tail nervously back and forth. "Like what?"

Saderia fell silent. Her heart suddenly began to slow down and her distant eyes seemed to stare straight through the rocky walls. "I want to leave."

His eyes widened in shock. "What? You sound just like Karenisha!"

Saderia's eyes flashed. "Not permanently! I just want to find my Dad!"

He narrowed his eyes skeptically. "Do you even know where he is?"

Saderia flicked her tail absent-mindedly. "He's somewhere in the desert."

Dash opened his mouth to reply, then paused. "Wait, the desert? Are you sure?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Of course I'm sure. I saw the sand."

He blinked several times. "What are hunters doing in the desert?"

Saderia froze. Wondering about *when* it had happened, she had almost forgotten *where* it had happened. What *were* hunters doing in the desert? Had they figured out the dingoes lived there and moved on to hunting them? Wouldn't they just get lost, though? The dingoes knew the

desert well and they were vicious. They weren't exactly ideal prey. Why would the hunters bother...unless they hadn't gone to the desert to hunt dingoes...

Her eyes widened in shock. What if the hunters had to go through the desert to get back to their homes? If that was true, it meant they had left the forest and that Makero had been gone so long because he *was* searching the forest to make sure the hunters truly were gone. If that was the case, then if the Dream had taken place in the desert...

"Dash, how long has Dad been gone?" she murmured, her eyes distant.

Dash frowned and counted off on his paws in surprise. "It's been two weeks."

Saderia nodded slowly. "He said it might take him two weeks to get to the forest, check it out, and come back. But the two weeks were probably going to be spent checking out the forest and it might actually take longer for him to come back. If that's true, then Dad might not have even started out yet. And that means that it's likely the Dream predicted the future. Which means...we still have a chance to find him and warn him!"

Dash's eyes lit up with hope, but then he froze, his expression darkening. "That might be true, but you're forgetting the time it would take us to get to our old forest to warn him. It could take us days and by that time, Makero might already be gone. And if he went into the desert, it could take months to find him, and by that time..."

"...It would be too late." Her ears flattened in distress. "Why didn't I get this Dream sooner? Then I could have done something!" She struggled to shake off her anxiety. "I *am* missing something. There's got to be a reason I only got this Dream now. There's got to be something missing, something that would help me find my Dad faster."

Dash frowned in confusion. "But what?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea. What could help us cross the desert faster?"

Dash started to speak, then fell silent, his eyes darkening. A long silence spread out between them until he finally let out a soft, reluctant sigh. "A dingo could."

Saderia blinked in surprise and sudden hope. "What?"



He uncomfortably shifted his paws and avoided her stunned gaze. "Well, dingoes know the desert up and down. One would be able to lead us through it without getting lost. But..." He narrowed his eyes. "That's not a possibility. The dingoes are evil."

She frowned. "Dingo wasn't."

"Dingo was a minority. The rest of them hate 'forest food.'"

She let out a soft sigh. "You're right. But what else is there?"

Dash frowned. "I don't know. We have to do *something*. He could be in trouble!"

Saderia stared down at her paws, her mind whirling. "What *are* we supposed to do? We need *something* to help us find Dad faster." Falling silent, she slowly looked up, her eyes narrowing in wonder. Silence spread out between them for a long moment.

"A dingo," she whispered. "If only Dingo was still alive..."

Dash tensed and gently rested his tail on her shoulder. "Saderia..."

She brushed his tail away. "It's okay, Dash. I'm all right. Still..." Her eyes grew absent with wonder as she gazed out at the room. "Maybe someone else can help me."

Dash frowned. "What do you mean? Who else could help us cross the desert?"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It's a long shot, but...I have to wait for night. There's another dingo I know who might help me."

Dash blinked in shock. "What? Who?"

Her eyes gleamed with determination and a slight smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "I'll tell you tomorrow if it works. I don't want to get my hopes up too much."

Dash hesitated, then nodded. "All right, Saderia. You do what you think is best."

"Mom, you have to eat." Hiding a sigh, Saderia held an apple out to her mother.

Lying listlessly on her rocky bed, barely seeming to notice her, Karenisha slowly glanced down at the apple before pushing it away with a flick of her paw and looking up at Saderia with the same dull, lifeless expression. "You're home late," she murmured.

Saderia cast a glance back into the main room. Darkness shrouded the corners of the den as the sun sank below the horizon. She and Dash had spent most of the day talking to Jeb, but the hours had been tainted with worry. Her eerie Dream had nagged at the back of her mind, filling her with equal amounts of dread and determination. The hours had passed by slowly when she had longed for night to arrive. Now that the sun was beginning to set, she could feel her paws itching with the desire to try to get some sleep.

Placing the apple on the bed, she let out a soft sigh. "Dash and I were exploring."

Karenisha stared at the apple, her eyes distant and clouded. "You like exploring."

"Yeah, I guess so," Saderia muttered, unsure of how else to respond.

Silence fell over them as Karenisha stared forlornly at the wall, her eyes darkening. After a long hesitation, she met Saderia's eyes. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

Saderia blinked in surprise and stared down at her in shock. Her mouth gaped open, but no words spilled out. How was she supposed to answer a question like that?

Sadness gleamed in the Queen's eyes. "Your silence tells me a lot."

Saderia took a deep breath. "Look, Mom, I don't know what's what anymore. Nothing's normal anymore. Don't ask me questions like that because I don't know what I think. We're all a little crazy at this point anyway." She hesitated. "Mom, I don't know if I believe what you saw or not. I honestly don't know. But whether it's true or not, I'm not just going to give up. If there's something I can do to change it...I'll do it."

Karenisha's eyes clouded with sadness. "What if there's nothing you can do?"

She shrugged. "There's always *something*. Even if I don't know what it is."

The Queen looked down with a soft sigh. "I think you're wrong."

"Then we'll disagree." Saderia's ears drooped and her tail brushed sadly against the ground. "I miss you, Mom. I wish you would go back to normal."

Karenisha just looked away, her eyes growing dull with sorrow.

Saderia rested her paw gently on her shoulder. "Eat the apple, Mom. Please."

Her eyes flashed and she pulled away. "It's late. You should get to sleep."

She heaved a sigh. "All right." Trying to push away the grief, she crept out of her mother's room into her own room and saw Dash lying on top of her bed.

He looked up worriedly when she climbed onto the bed. "How's she doing?"

Saderia laid down with a sigh. "She asked me if I thought she was crazy."

He winced with sympathy. "What did you say?"

She shrugged. "The truth. Or what I know of it, at least." Glancing around the dark room, she flicked Dash gently with her tail and managed a smile. "Anyway, I know it's still pretty early, but I'm a little tired. I think I'm going to go ahead and go to sleep."

He smiled back and nodded. "Okay. In that case, goodnight, Saderia. I'll see you in the morning." Giving her a smile, he leapt off the bed and padded out of the room.

Rolling onto her side, Saderia watched until his tail disappeared behind the rocky wall. Silence fell over the dark den. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "I'm sorry for all the things that have happened lately. I didn't believe in Dreams for such a long time, but I've gotten over that and I know I need them to help me. After everything that's happened, I know I have to be strong, but there are things I can't do on my own. I don't want to lose someone the same way I lost your brother. You promised that you would help me. So please help."

Letting out a sigh, she laid back and closed her eyes, hoping she had been heard.

Surrounded by darkness, Saderia blinked open her eyes and jumped with a cry of surprise when the blackness faded away. Sandy dunes rose up around her in all directions, stretching out as far as she could see. Blinking in shock, she waited for something to happen and felt her heart skip when nothing did. Looking around wildly, she searched for some clue as to what was happening, then froze when a soft voice whispered behind her.

"Long time no see, tiger."

Saderia whirled around and felt her heart leap with surprise. A wide smile spread across her face when she saw who was standing behind her. “Claw...You’re here!”

A wispy light brown dingo smiled. “I couldn’t just ignore what you said.”

Tears of joy pricked Saderia’s eyes as she gazed at Dingo’s ghostly sister. A faint light shimmered around the spirit’s fluffy, translucent legs and glittered around the bright pink ribbon tied around her neck. Her tail flicked lightly back and forth, leaving ghostly trails through the hazy dark blue sky. Her light brown eyes gleamed with happiness, but when Saderia looked closely, she could sense guilt hiding behind the joy.

A frown spread across her face. “Claw? What’s wrong?”

Claw blinked at her in surprise. “I would have thought it was obvious.”

She tipped her head to the side in confusion. “What? Why are you so upset?”

The ghost let out a soft sigh and stared at the ground. Silence spread out between them until she murmured, “I know how hard these past six months have been for you.”

“You’ve been watching me?”

“Of course.” Claw stared at her paws for a long moment before finally taking a deep breath and meeting Saderia’s gaze with sad light brown eyes. “Do you hate me?”

Saderia blinked in surprise. “Hate you? No, why would I ever hate you?”

Claw sighed. “I’ve been watching you for a while. I...I heard what you said one morning about...hating me back when your friend was kept in the fortress.”

Saderia’s face grew hot with shame. “I’m sorry. I...I wasn’t in my right mind back then and I didn’t mean it. I was just so angry during that whole time...”

The spirit gently flicked her tail to wave away her apologies. “It’s all right. I understand. But you have every right to hate me. I abandoned you.”

A tiny shiver raced up her spine when she remembered the pain she had felt the last few months when Claw hadn’t come to visit her, but she

shook it off and met the ghost's eyes. "I don't hate you. But...why didn't you visit me for the past six months?"

Claw sighed. "Because my job isn't just to be your friend. I'm supposed to help you. The reason I never visited you was because you needed to learn how to cope with the loss of your friend. Your ancestors said you wouldn't get anywhere if you didn't learn how to deal with that now. I decided I would have to stay out of it. It wasn't an easy decision. It was hard to see you suffer, but you had to learn how to cope." Her eyes twinkled with pride. "And you did, so now you're ready for anything. But I understand if you're mad at me for abandoning you."

Saderia watched her silently. Memories of their first meeting back in Dingo's den flashed through her mind. Claw had asked her to not tell Dingo about seeing her because he was just starting to get over her death. She had wanted him to finally heal after a year of suffering. A tiny glimmer of understanding glowed in her chest when she realized Claw had done the same thing to her to make her as strong as her brother. "I don't hate you," she murmured. "I know you were trying to help me and I need your help now."

Claw managed a weak smile. "My help will most likely frustrate you."

Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It might, but I know that you can't give everything away and that I've got to learn for myself. I understand that now."

The spirit blinked in surprise, then smiled a bright smile. "I see, this is why you're special. Thank you for forgiving me. I owe you so much as of right now."

She shook her head and waved away her thanks with a flick of her tail. "You don't owe me anything. Just please help me in whatever way you can. All I want is for you to visit me sometimes when things get tough, but I'll try to understand if you can't."

"For a while, I actually couldn't," Claw replied. "I couldn't visit you because you had given up on your Dreams. But after you helped Dash and the little Jeb creature, you got your senses back. I've been waiting for the right moment to apologize ever since."

Saderia let out a soft sigh. "You don't have to apologize, Claw. I understand why you did this. After all, Dingo had to go through the same

things I did and he managed to survive for a long time, so I guess it's only fair that I had to go through it without help, too." She paused and felt a tingle of hope. "By the way...is...is he here with you?"

Claw tensed and looked uncomfortably away. "You're going to hate me for this, but that's one of the things I'm afraid I can't tell you. It would ruin the surprise."

Saderia frowned and felt a rush of disappointment, but she tried to shake it off. "That's all right. So what *can* you tell me? Have you been watching me the whole time?"

The spirit nodded. "Yes, I've been watching you for months... among others."

Saderia felt a hint of unease, but shook it off, knowing Claw watching her was a good thing even if it was kind of odd. "So...can you see anywhere in the world?"

She shook her head. "No, I can only see places I've been in, seen, or places that *you* have been in or seen. I can see the desert because I lived there. When I first became a ghost, I couldn't see *inside* your forest, but after I became your spirit guide, I was able to see inside it, and since *you* are living in this forest now, I'm able to see all of it as well."

Saderia nodded, feeling a tingle of wonder at the strange world Claw inhabited. A rush of hope flowed through her. "Since you see the desert...have you seen my Dad?"

Claw's eyes softened with sympathy. "So we come to the reason you're here. Yes, I've seen your father. I've watched him travel back through the desert to your old forest home to investigate and lately I've watched as he started his journey back to this forest."

Saderia's eyes widened in alarm. "So he's in the desert right now?"

Claw nodded. "He started out just a day ago."

Her heart began to beat faster with fear. "And?"

She held up a paw. "No harm has come to him. Although he is in a...situation."

Saderia flattened her ears in panic. "What do you mean by that?"

Claw sighed and rested a wispy paw on her shoulder that she could barely feel. "Relax. Don't rush into this. Take it one step at a time, learn what you have to learn."

She lashed her tail desperately back and forth. "But what if my Dad gets hurt?"

The spirit gave her a calm gaze. "No great harm will come to your father. You've got plenty of time to figure things out...although things might get a little hectic soon."

Saderia paused in surprise. "How do you know? Can you predict the future too?"

A smile spread across her face. "Not in the way you can. But I can see all that's going on in three places. I could be wrong, but the outcome is pretty obvious to me."

An eager look lit up Saderia's eyes. "What is it?"

Claw grinned and chuckled. "If I told you, it would be too easy."

Saderia let out a semi-playful hiss. "Can't anything be easy?"

Claw giggled. "If everything was easy, it wouldn't be life. If you want my advice, I would say to calm down. Do what your instinct is telling you and wait a while to see what happens. So many animals don't listen to their instinct. I mean, look what happened to me when Bone lured me into the Snake Pit." She gave her a gentle smile. "Life has a lot of twists and turns, Saderia. You'll come to expect the unexpected."

"Why? What's going to happen?"

Claw just smiled. "You want to leave to look for your father, but don't go right now. You need a dingo to guide you to him. That's why you came to me for help, but I happen to know someone else who could be there for you to physically guide you in real life and fight for you in times of danger. You just wouldn't expect that guide."

Saderia frowned in bewilderment. "Can you at least tell me how long to wait?"

Claw shrugged. "Give it a day or two to figure it out...and another day or so to calm down from your surprise and make a plan."

Saderia narrowed her eyes in confusion. "Okay..."

Claw grinned. "You'll see. In the meantime, I will give you another hint." She hesitated, then leaned closer. "Why don't you go to the edge of the desert tomorrow at nightfall to see if you can see someone on the horizon? Who knows? Maybe your father was able to get out of his situation. And even if he hasn't, maybe you'll find the means to help him there." She gave her a grin. "Just be careful, and remember that if I

accidentally lead you into danger, it's only because I'm trying to help you. That's all I'm saying."

Saderia frowned in wonder, but slowly nodded her head. "All right."

Claw smiled. "Take care, Saderia. I'll be watching." She gave her a kind wave, then slowly faded out of sight. Before Saderia could blink, a wave of blackness crashed over the scene, dissolving the wispy desert and pushing her back into unconsciousness.

Blinking open her eyes, Saderia slowly sat up in her bed. A tiny smile spread across her face when she realized that even though Claw hadn't told her much, she had given her a tip. Laying back, she suddenly wondered if Claw was part of the prophecy. She hadn't thought the prophecy would include animals that were...dead, but Claw was doing a lot to guide her. She probably already knew she was part of the prophecy.

Thinking back, she felt a jolt of unease when she remembered Claw's warning about leading her into danger. The memory sent a shiver down her spine, but she shook it off. Danger would be lurking everywhere if she planned on saving her father and she would risk anything to save him. She just hoped Claw's advice would help her.

The sound of paws thudding against the stone made her look up and grin when she saw Dash poke his head around the corner of her room. Brushing his messy mane out of his eyes, he smiled and padded toward her. "What are you so happy about?"

She grinned. "It worked," she whispered. "I saw her. I talked to Claw."

His eyes widened in shock. "Really? You mean...Dingo's dead sister?"

She nodded eagerly. "She told me to wait before I try to save Dad, but she also said that tonight we should visit the edge of the forest. She said it might help."

Dash blinked in amazement and seemed to shake himself to push away the shock gleaming in his amber eyes. "O-okay. What are we going to do until then?"

She shrugged. "We should probably visit Jeb and hang around with him until nightfall. Once it gets dark, we'll head toward the desert to see if we can find anything."



Blinking rapidly, Dash managed a bright smile. "All right. We should let Cia know we'll be staying out. What are we supposed to see on the edge of the desert?"

Saderia smiled. "I don't know. I just hope it will help."

After picking her way through the woods, Saderia finally stepped out into a small clearing with Dash close beside her. Jeb stood beside the hole leading into the underground, looking around expectantly. His eyes lit up when he spotted them and he instantly raced toward them. "Hi," he said, smiling. "How are you doing?"

Saderia smiled back, though she was eager for nightfall. "Great. How about you?"

"Great!" he exclaimed. "Secka hasn't bothered me since you scared him."

She flicked him gently with her tail. "That's great. How are your parents?"

He shrugged. "They're doing okay. So what's been going on?"

Saderia opened her mouth to shrug off the question, then paused and exchanged a long glance with Dash. "Actually...a few...weird...things have been going on lately."

His eyes widened in wonder and unease. "Bad things?"

"Sort of." She shifted uncomfortably. "When I met you, I told you about my family, but I didn't tell you my father had left a few days before I met you."

Jeb blinked at her in surprise. "Left? Where did he go?"

She let out a soft sigh. "Remember the old forest I told you about? Two weeks ago he left to go investigate our old forest to see if those hunters that drove us out have gone."

"Two weeks?" He stared up at her in shock. "That's a long time!"

"I suppose, but he had to cross the desert." Her eyes grew distant. "I don't know if you've ever seen it, but there's an enormous desert waiting outside this forest. All it is is a huge expanse of sand stretching out for miles with no trees or bushes or anything."

Jeb shivered. "I've caught glimpses of it. It seems like a really creepy place."

Saderia heaved a sigh. “Well, in a way it is. It is a bit...dangerous out there. Anyway, my father had to leave and the only way to get back to the forest is by crossing the desert. We’ve all made the journey before, but I’m still a bit worried. I don’t actually think anything bad happened to him, but just the other night I had a Dream about him.”

His eyes widened in wonder. “You mean one of your special Dreams?”

She nodded. “Yes, one where I could see what I think was the future. In the Dream, it looked like something bad happened to my father. I’m not *entirely* sure what happened, but I have a good idea. I think the hunters had something to do with it.”

His eyes widened. “You think something bad happened...is happening...will happen...to your Dad?”

“It looks like it.” A hint of fear rose in her chest, but she forced herself to shake it off. “I want to do something to stop it from happening, but I’m not entirely sure what. I have to check something tonight because of it. In the next few days, there might be times where I can’t visit you if I have to look into something to try to figure out what to do.”

He nodded fearfully. “I understand. I hope you can save your Dad.”

She sighed. “Me too.” A feeling of calm spread over her. “I’m not *that* worried. I know I wouldn’t have had that Dream if there wasn’t something I could do about it.”

Jeb blinked, then nodded. “Okay. Do you need to go now to check something?”

She shook her head. “No, I have to wait until night. I can stay here for a little while and maybe tell you about my other Dreams. For now, let’s just all try to relax.”

Jeb gazed up at her in incredulity, his eyes shining with amazement. “That’s incredible!” he stammered. “Your Dreams really showed you all of that?”

A tiny smile spread across Saderia’s face. “Yeah. I didn’t understand them all at first, but now they make more sense.” Trailing off, she gazed at the dark trees and shadowed bushes around her with Dash and Jeb close beside her. After leading her two friends out on a walk through the woods and talking about a few of her strange Dreams and wild adventures, it had

started to grow dark. Looking ahead, she saw the trees start to grow thinner and soon stepped out into the clearing surrounding Jeb's Spring.

Jeb smiled when they stopped in the clearing. "That's really cool! I can't believe you saw all of that and that you've been to so many places!"

She flicked her tail with an embarrassed smile. "Like I said, it was hard to understand at first. But we did go to all kinds of different places..." Her eyes flicked up to the sky above them and her voice trailed off. A jolt of shock raced through her body. Above the leafy canopy, the full moon shimmered brightly in the black sky. Her eyes widened in horror. "Wait a minute, the moon's already up! When did it become night?"

Dash blinked in shock. "It's been dark, but I thought it was just late afternoon!"

Jeb glanced back and forth between them in alarm. "What's going on?"

Her heart started to race. "I'm sorry, Jeb, but we have to go *now*! There was something really important we needed to do at night and I didn't realize how late it was!"

He blinked at her in confusion. "Oh, okay. So you have to leave now?"

She nodded rapidly, her paws itching with anticipation. "Yes, I'm sorry, but we have to go. Hopefully we'll see you tomorrow."

He frowned in befuddlement, but nodded slowly. "All right... Goodbye, Saderia."

She gave him a brisk nod and turned to Dash. "Let's go! We're already late!"

He nodded meekly and jumped to his paws. Calling a quick goodbye to Jeb, Saderia raced toward the bushes surrounding the edges of the clearing with Dash close beside her. Twigs snapped in front of her when she dove past the prickly undergrowth. The clearing disappeared behind her in a matter of moments as she lunged past thick clumps of brush and dodged around the rough trunks of trees. Claw's words burned in her mind every time her paws slammed against the ground. Something was bound to happen on the edge of the desert. Someone would be there to help her find her father.

Moving faster and faster and hearing Dash panting close beside her, she looked around wildly and saw the trees start to thin out. With every step

she took, the grass seemed to grow shorter and less undergrowth snagged at her fur. Looking up, she felt her heart leap when her eyes pierced through the woods and caught a glimpse of brown sand in the distance. Hope lit up her eyes and she raced forward with Dash hard on her paws.

A sudden cry of alarm sounded beside her, making her ears prick up, but she didn't dare to stop. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Dash stumble forward and twist a paw caught in a clump of weeds, but she barely noticed. Her heart pounded wildly with hope and wonder as she forced herself to keep moving despite her exhaustion.

"Saderia, wait! Slow down!"

Pricking her ears, she whirled around to look back at Dash. Her eyes widened in horror when she saw him race after her and stumble toward a clump of undergrowth. Before she could realize what had happened, he plunged out of sight with a sharp yelp of fear. Gaping in shock, she lunged toward the dense clump of bushes. Parting the thick undergrowth, she let out a gasp when she found herself staring down into a black pitfall.

"Dash!" she shouted, her heart skipping with fear. "Are you down there?"

A soft whimper floated up to her ears. "Saderia? What happened?"

She let out a shaky breath of relief. "You fell in a pitfall! Are...are you all right?"

His trembling voice rose up from far below, so distant she could barely hear it. "I...I think so." He let out a shaky breath. "Saderia, it's really dark down here..."

She took a deep, trembling breath and struggled to think, her mind racing with terror. "Just hang on for a minute! I'll find a vine and pull you out like we did for Jeb!"

He let out a soft whimper. "Okay, but hurry! It's creepy down here!"

"I will!" Yanking her head away from the pitfall, she looked around wildly for any sign of a vine and felt her heart skip when she realized the sparse trees around her held no sign of them. Letting out a sharp, nervous hiss, she whirled back around to face the pitfall. "Dash, I don't see any vines! Do you remember seeing some on the way here?"

Dash hesitated. "I...I think I saw some along the way, but it's a *long* way away!"

Saderia flicked her tail fearfully. "I'm not going to forget where you are. I'll go back the way we came and find a vine! Just hold on! I'll be back as soon as I can!"

"Saderia, wait!" Dash's terrified protest rose in the air, but she ignored it.

Whirling around and rapidly scanning the trees, she looked for the direction she had come from and bounded toward it. Crashing through the woods, she helplessly scanned the trees for a vine. Sharp branches lashed out at her, tearing across her face and splattering her fur with blood. Blinking away the blood, she stumbled past the trees and ran faster.

Terrified pants shuddered out of her chest as she darted past thick trees. Looking around desperately, she froze when she spotted a long, thick vine dangling from a tree in front of her. Feeling her heart leap, she lunged toward the shadowed bushes springing up around the base of the tree to grab it. Her heart ached with anticipation as she took a huge step forward to grab the vine, then froze. Her paw stumbled through the bushes into nothing but open air. Before she could stop herself, she tumbled into the thick clump of brush. Past the undergrowth, the ground gave way into a long, pitch black abyss. A scream tore out of her throat as she stumbled into the blackness of the pitfall.

Air rushed past her face, whipping her fur up around her. Her scream echoed around her as her body twisted in darkness. She reached out desperately to grab onto the sides of the hole to catch herself, but there was nothing around her but air and blackness.

Her breath left her throat the instant she smacked against the bottom of the pitfall. Pain shot to every inch of her body and deep pants shuddered out of her chest. Her wide eyes stared unblinkingly into the darkness around her. Taking a shaky breath, she looked up into nothing but blackness. Gritting her teeth, she pulled herself up and felt damp, gritty dirt slide off her side with a soft rustling noise. Sticky blood clung to her fur and her body stung in places where sharp stones had dug into her skin. Agonizing pain seared in one of her paws and she had to bite her tongue to hide a scream, realizing it must have twisted. Looking around, she felt her heart skip in fear when she realized she couldn't see anything but darkness. When she looked up, she couldn't even see the top of the hole. The darkness closed in on her, making her shiver in terror and struggle to breathe.

Panic burned in her chest when she realized she was trapped at the bottom of a hidden pitfall miles away from any neighborhood. Her heart ached with horror when she realized that her best friend was trapped as well. Dread seeped into her body, but she forced herself to stand and ignore the searing pain in her paw. Feeling around in the darkness, she brushed her paw against wet clumps of dirt. Stumbling forward, she searched for the wall, hearing her own heavy breathing echo in the ominous silence.

Her paw slipped on the gritty ground and she staggered forward. Gritting her teeth to conceal a cry of pain, she stumbled and pressed up against a freezing wall of dirt. Her breath caught in her throat and she dug her claws into the wall in the hopes of climbing up. Dismay overwhelmed her when her claws sank into the soft earth. Suppressing a whimper, she searched for a place to get a stronger hold. There had to be a spot where the dirt was strong enough to hold her. She had to find it for Dash's sake.

Dash stared up at the top of the pitfall, his tail twitching with fear. A tiny sliver of light shimmered somewhere far above him, just barely visible above the darkness. Chills shivered down his spine, making him feel cold and numb. Blood clung to his fur and dirt stung the wounds inflicted by the sharp stones beneath him. His heart beat faster with every minute that passed by. Where was Saderia? Why wasn't she back yet with the vine? He tried to calm his frantically beating heart. The vines were hanging a long way away from where he had fallen. It would take a while for her to get them and return and he shouldn't be so impatient. Saderia would return with the vine any minute. Wouldn't she?

Taking a shaky breath, he groped around in the darkness, ignoring the sting of his wounds. He froze when his paw brushed up against the wall of the hole and stared up at the top of the pitfall with desperate eyes. Digging his claws into the side of the wall, he struggled to pull himself up and let out a groan when his paws slipped through the earth. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't climb his way out. His only hope was Saderia.

"Be patient," he growled, but his words couldn't drown out the wild beating of his heart. After a hesitation, he let out a loud shout. "Saderia!" Silence followed his words.

Letting out a shaky sigh, he stumbled backward. His voice and his breath seemed too loud in the heavy silence. Hanging his head, he took a

deep breath and tried not to let panic overwhelm him. Saderia would return to him. She wouldn't abandon him.

Panic blazed in Saderia's chest. Terrified pants shuddered out of her throat as she raced around the hole, clawing at the walls and letting out a whimper when the dirt crumbled. Agony burned in her twisted paw when she slammed it against the dirt to get a better hold, but she barely felt the pain. Hours had passed by with her searching for any way out. Stumbling away from the wall and panting in terror, she sat back and finally realized there were only two ways out of the hole: getting pulled out by someone else or death.

Her heart skipped and her eyes widened in horror. The closest neighborhood was miles and miles away and the path she had taken to get to the edge of the forest was wild and not often traveled. No animal liked to walk too close to the desert. Apart from her and Dash, no one had probably even gone close to there since they first arrived in the forest. Dismay crashed down on her. No one knew where they were. She hadn't told Cia, Jash, or Karenisha where she was planning to go and she hadn't mentioned anything to Jeb. No one would know where to even begin looking for her.

Terror surged through her exhausted body. Raising her head, she let out a shout. "Help! Somebody, help! I'm down here!" Tense silence followed her words.

Suppressing a frightened sob, she looked down and squeezed her eyes shut. "Mom! Dad! Cia! Uncle Jash! Someone! Help!"

The world around her was silent.

Terror nearly overwhelmed Dash as he stared up at the top of the hole. Hours had passed by without even a glimpse of Saderia. Pain and fear sent shivers racing down his spine when he wondered what had happened to her. She wouldn't just abandon him unless...A cold chill spread to every inch of his body. What if she had gotten hurt? Had she just forgotten where he was...or had a disaster gotten her? What if she was in pain? What if she couldn't move? What if she was unable to get help? What if she was *dying*?

Panic sent his heart racing frantically in his chest as images of Saderia's wounded form flashed through his mind. He couldn't bear to think that she might be in trouble when he was powerless to help her, but what

else could have happened to her? Why else hadn't she returned after hours had melted into more terrifying hours?

Dash squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head desperately. Feeling a twinge of fear, he tried to push the thoughts away, but the fear lingered. As the darkness closed in around him, he almost wished Saderia *had* forgotten where he was. If she hadn't, there was only one other option: she was hurt, stuck, or in trouble.

Exhaustion haunted every inch of Saderia's body, making her eyelids droop and her shoulders sag. Her belly growled with hunger and her throat was raw from screaming for help. She had given up a long time ago when no one heard her desperate pleas. Letting out a sigh, she winced when an image of Dash lying alone in the pitfall flashed through her mind. Guilt washed over her when she realized she had let down her closest friend.

Trying not to wince in pain, she slowly laid down on the damp, freezing dirt and buried her face in her paws. Thoughts of her family whirled through her mind. By now they would have noticed her absence and had probably set out to look for her. Somehow she doubted they would think to search near the desert when she hardly ever ventured to the edge of the forest. Even with her mother's weak Dream sense, she doubted they would find them. They might never find her.

Another pang of guilt racked her body when she realized how worried they must be. Thinking of her mother's lost, terrified eyes, she winced and buried her face deeper into her paws. How many times had the Queen come close to losing her daughter? Danger had threatened to take Saderia away from her over and over again. No wonder the Queen had started to break down after her Dream. Months of constantly coming so close to losing someone she loved must have been wearing her down for ages.

Wincing, she pushed the thoughts away and suddenly felt alone and helpless in the impenetrable darkness around her. Her body longed for sleep, but when she imagined sleeping in the cold, eerie blackness, she couldn't help but shudder.

Taking a deep breath, she lifted her head one last time. "Help!" she called, her voice cracked with dryness and hopelessness. "I'm down here! Someone help!"



Silence.

Heaving a soft sigh, she let her head drop back onto her paws and squeezed her eyes shut. She tried to push away the worry nagging at the back of her mind, then froze and jumped in shock when a soft voice floated down from somewhere far above her.

“Who’s down there?”

Leaping to her paws, she stared up at the top of the hole in shock, her heart skipping. Had someone actually found her? Hope burned in her chest and she opened her mouth to call back, then froze. Something about that voice sounded eerily familiar...

“Hello?” The tentative voice was just barely loud enough for her to hear.

A jolt of panic shot through her chest. “Help! If someone’s up there, please help!”

A startled yelp sounded at the top of the hole. “Who’s down there?”

“Princess Saderia!” she gasped, feeling her heart beat wildly with desperation. Something about that voice sent shivers of shock down her spine. Silence followed her words and she gazed up in horror, terrified that her rescuer had left. Straining to listen, she felt a surge of relief when a quiet voice whispered into the darkness above her.

“I knew it was you,” the voice gasped. “I...I found you! I finally found you!”

Shock washed over her. The voice sounded so painfully familiar she almost couldn’t believe it was real. Feeling her legs tremble, she stared up at the top of the hole with wide, stunned eyes. An image of the desert flashed through her mind, sending a shiver down her spine. Her own words echoed in her ears. *I don’t know if the dead are living or if the living are dead.* Claw’s words burned in her mind. *Expect the unexpected.*

It couldn’t be...

A soft, rustling noise sounded far above her and she stared desperately upward, longing to see her rescuer. Standing rigidly still, she waited, then let out a cry of alarm when a long vine suddenly dropped down in front of her and smacked the gritty ground.

The voice echoed around her. “Saderia? Saderia, it’s me!”

Suppressing a shiver, Saderia stumbled forward and grabbed the thick vine. A jolt of shock raced through her when it reminded her of the

vine Dingo had used to rescue her from the Snake Pit. Her eyes grew wide with hope and her paws trembled with disbelief.

It was impossible...

"I...I've got the vine," she stammered, digging her claws into it.

Silence followed her words, but after a moment's pause, the vine slowly started to rise up into the air, pulling her along with it. A tiny whimper escaped her throat when her paws were lifted off the ground, but she clung to the vine and looked up at the top of the pitfall. It had to be him and she trusted him with her life, but how could it be?

The vine lifted her up higher until she could just barely make out the starry sky. Hope glowed in her heart. The darkness faded away until she could make out the bushes hiding the pitfall. Trying to suppress a cry of relief, she closed her eyes and let her rescuer pull her over the edge of the hole. She let out a shaky breath when her paws brushed solid ground and forced herself to let go of the vine and collapse onto the grass. Lying on her belly, she stared at the ground with wide eyes, almost unable to believe what had happened. A shadow fell over her face. Feeling her breath catch in her throat, she slowly looked up at the animal who had saved her and let out a soft, shaky gasp.

A tiny smile spread across her face.

"Dingo."

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## Old Friend

Messy brown fur hung off the dingo's skinny body and his long, bristly tail swung lightly back and forth. Old scars lined his face and his ribs juttied out of his gaunt sides. His light brown eyes were warm and kind but dull and shadowed with the familiar tint of pain that haunted his gaze. A dusty pink ribbon was tied around his neck and wrapped around an old, faded book with the name 'Claw' scratched across the front of it.

Saderia stared up at him with shock and disbelief shining in her wide amber eyes. She blinked several times, as if expecting the dingo to disappear like a good dream. Her heart skipped and froze when she opened her eyes and he still stood in front of her, staring down at her with concerned light brown eyes.

He studied her closely. "Are you all right? How long were you down there?"

"A while." She blinked and gazed at him in amazement. "I don't understand."

He tipped his head to the side. "Don't understand what?"

"Well..." She trailed off and studied him closely, trying to understand. "Is this a Dream, or..." A sharp flash of panic suddenly sliced through her heart. "Am I dead?"

Dingo frowned and shook his head. "No...You're alive and this isn't a dream."

She blinked at him in disbelief. "Then how are you here?"

He narrowed his eyes in misunderstanding. "What do you mean?"

"Aren't you dead?"

Dingo blinked and stared at her in shock, his eyes widening. "I don't think so."

Shock burned in her chest. "So...I'm really awake and you're not a ghost?"

He frowned. "A ghost? No, of course I'm not a ghost. And yes, you're awake."

Her eyes grew wide with shock and she gazed at him, speechless and stunned. "I...I thought the dingoes killed you," she whispered.

Dingo let out a soft sigh and looked down. "They didn't quite get the job done."

"But...but..." A light seemed to flash in her eyes as she struggled for the right words and a sudden feeling of alarm washed over her. "Dash!"

Dingo looked up, his light brown eyes narrowing in confusion. "Oh, yeah, where is he? Was he down there with you?"

"No," she said quickly, her heart skipping back to life and beating rapidly. "He's stuck in another pitfall and it's been hours and he's in trouble..." She trailed off with wide eyes and a quiet whimper. "We have to help him!"

Leaning forward, she tried to grab the vine, but Dingo lunged forward and picked it up for her before she could take it. He nodded seriously when she looked up to show he would follow her. Nodding back, she reluctantly tore her eyes away from him and lunged into a clump of bushes. Wriggling out, she darted through the woods with Dingo close behind her and raced back in the direction she had come, scanning the undergrowth for the bushes that hid the pitfall. Weaving around a tree, she skidded to a halt in front of a dark clump of bushes and shoved them aside while Dingo padded to a stop behind her.

"Dash!" she shouted, peering into the blackness beneath her. "I'm back!"

Deep inside the pitfall, Dash pricked his ears and looked up in shock, his heart skipping in amazement. "Saderia? Is that you?"

"Yes, it's me!" Her heart ached when she thought of the hours he had spent alone. "Are you okay? I'm so sorry I took so long! I got stuck in a pitfall and I couldn't get out!"

Relief washed over Dash and a weak smile spread across his face when he realized she wasn't too badly hurt. "It's okay and I'm fine! Do you have a vine now?"

Saderia breathed a sigh of relief even though she could still feel her fur prickling with shock and amazement when she saw Dingo peering curiously down into the pitfall. "Yes, I've got a vine." She hesitated and

glanced over at her canine companion, her eyes wide with wonder. After a long pause, she murmured, "Dingo's here."

A long silence spread out between them.

After a long moment, Dash's stunned voice boomed out of the pitfall. "**What?**"

Narrowing her eyes in unease and uncertainty, she suddenly wished she had waited a little longer to spring the news on him. Shaking off her nervousness, she glanced over at Dingo and the vine. "Never mind. We're sending down the vine!"

At the bottom of the hole, Dash gaped in disbelief. "We? What is this—a joke?"

"I'll...he'll...*someone* will explain later!" Saderia stammered.

Dingo let out a soft chuckle and leaned over the pitfall. "She's not insane!"

Dash let out a sharp cry of shock, recognizing the voice. "What is going on?"

Saderia stared at Dingo in wonder and amazement. "I have no idea," she murmured, letting her eyes scan over him to see if it was truly him. His fur didn't seem transparent the way Claw's had, and when he stepped forward and let his bristly fur brush up against hers, it felt as real as ever. Her mind whirled with wonder and incredulity. How could it possibly be true? Trying to shake off her confusion, she turned back to the hole. "Dash, grab onto the vine and we'll pull you up!" Without waiting for his response, she grabbed part of the vine behind Dingo and helped him lower it into the pitfall.

Dash stared at the vine with wide, stunned eyes as it was lowered down to the ground. The voice he had heard sounded exactly like Dingo's voice, but how could he possibly be up there with Saderia? He blinked and shook himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming and felt his heart skip when the scene remained the same. Glancing nervously up at the top of the hole, he cautiously dug his claws into the vine. "I've got it!"

Pricking her ears, Saderia looked up to see Dingo give her a slight nod. Trying to hide the rush of shock that she and Dingo were working together again, she grabbed the vine and slowly started to pull it up. Her muscles ached in protest at having to lift up Dash's weight, but she tried to

ignore the pain. With Dingo's help, she slowly managed to haul the vine over the edge of the hole until she saw the tip of Dash's dark brown mane.

Digging his claws into the earth, Dash scrabbled over the edge of the hole and let out a shaky sigh when he finally stumbled onto solid ground. Panting to catch his breath, he slowly drew in a gulp of air. After a long hesitation, he looked up and his eyes grew wide with disbelief. A soft gasp tore out of his throat. "Dingo! It really *is* you!"

Saderia's eyes lit up with hope. "So I'm not just seeing things or Dreaming?"

Dingo let out a soft chuckle. "I forgot how weird you two were. It's been a while."

Dash blinked at him in amazement. "It's been six months. And you're dead."

Dingo snickered. "No, I'm very much alive." He paused and his gaze suddenly darkened. He cast an anxious glance over his shoulder before letting out a soft sigh and turning back to face them. "What exactly were you two doing in those holes?"

Saderia gazed at him in incredulity. "We...we both fell. But...but how can...how can you possibly be here right now?"

"Yeah, we thought the dingoes killed you!" Dash exclaimed, his eyes wide with shock. "We heard you howl and we thought you were dead! What's going on?"

Dingo heaved a long sigh. "The dingoes didn't kill me."

Saderia narrowed her eyes in confusion. "But how? I mean, they saw you fight Bone and...we saw them chase you and heard you let out that howl and...How?"

Dingo held up a paw and looked up to steadily meet her gaze. "Relax. I'm not dead. That's just what I want them to think. There was no possible chance I was going to be able to fight off eight dingoes or get away from them. They chased me down, cornered me, and attacked me all at once. I was pretty sure I was done for. I didn't actually think it was going to work, but I didn't have much to lose, so I tried playing dead. I just howled and fell and tried not to breathe too much so that they would leave me there for the vultures." He raised an eyebrow. "I was surprised it worked, but the dingoes never have been too bright. They also spent twelve years thinking I was weak and even with recent events, I guess it was hard for them to erase

that image. Besides, I was already pretty rough looking after...after the fight...so it must have really seemed like I was dead.” He let out a soft sigh. “Anyway, they left, and I just stayed there for a while in case some of them were still around. Eventually I managed to get up and run to my den to recover.”

Saderia stared at him in amazement, her mind whirling with shock. “I...I can hardly believe it.” After so many months of believing he was dead, she almost couldn’t accept he was truly back even though he was standing right in front of her. Her heart ached with hope, but her mind seemed unable to process that he was really alive. “Wh-why haven’t we seen you in six months?” she blurted out, her tail twitching with anxiety and longing to know why he had let them go on believing for so long that he was gone.

Dingo hung his head with a soft, guilty sigh. “I’m sorry I didn’t come to find you guys earlier, but there were some...complications.”

Dash blinked in confusion. “What complications?”

Dingo flattened his ears and looked away. “How long were you in those holes?” he retorted, changing the subject.

Saderia opened her mouth to respond, then felt a jolt of shock when she realized she and Dash had been trapped for hours. Glancing up at the shadowy canopy of leaves, she could see the full moon shining brightly in the sky. A flash of guilt raced through her. “I guess we have been down there for a long time. Our family’s probably worried...”

Dash blinked and looked up sharply, his eyes widening. “You’re right, they might have even started searching for us. We should get back.”

She blinked in shock. “But...but Dingo’s here. I have so many questions and...”

Dash glanced uneasily down at his paws. “I know, but we really need to get back. Especially to make sure Karenisha’s okay...” He trailed off and winced at the thought of the fragile Queen. Shaking off his unease, he glanced back at Dingo and nervously narrowed his eyes. “But Dingo, you have to come with us.”

Saderia’s head snapped up to look at her canine companion and her eyes narrowed with seriousness. “He right. I-I don’t want you out of my sight for a long time.”

Dingo managed a weak smile. “I understand.”

Saderia frowned, her mind beginning to whirl. "We do need to get back, but it would cause too much of an uproar if we introduced you to my family now, Dingo. Everyone thinks you're...well, dead. I don't want to have to explain it all now. I need to ask you some questions, but we have to tell our family we're all right, too." She paused and looked up at Dingo with nervous eyes. "Would you mind hiding in a bush outside our house until we've calmed them down and given everyone a chance to fall asleep?"

Dingo chuckled and grinned. "I've been in worse positions."

"All right." Saderia took a shaky breath, trying to take control of the situation. Her gaze lingered on Dingo. She didn't want to let him out of her sight even for just a few minutes, but she knew it was wrong to worry her mother and aunt and uncle. After a long hesitation, she slowly flicked her tail in the direction of her home. "It's, uh, that way."

Dingo gave her a slight smile, though she could see a tiny glint of hesitation and uncertainty in his light brown eyes. "Lead the way."

Blinking rapidly, she studied him closely as he got to his paws before shaking off her uneasiness. Taking a deep breath, she slowly turned to lead the way to her home and felt a shiver when she let Dingo out of her sight. Her heart skipped then glowed with a hint of relief when she whipped around to look back and make sure he was still there.

Padding toward the path that would take her back to her home, she barely noticed the sharp branches reaching toward her. The soft thudding sound of paw steps filled the air as Dash and Dingo fell into step behind her. Her gaze kept snapping backward to make sure Dingo hadn't disappeared, filling her with relief every time she saw him and freezing her with dread every time she looked away. After a few moments, Dingo stepped forward and fell into step beside her so she wouldn't have to keep worrying. A warm smile spread across his face when he looked down to meet her gaze. She returned the grin with a weak smile though her mind whirled with how surreal it felt to walk beside him.

Turning around, she bounded forward with Dingo close beside her and Dash trailing behind them. The forest around them became denser and denser the farther they traveled. The grass grew higher and higher the deeper into the woods they got and dozens of trees lined the land. Weaving her way in and out of the trees and skirting around dark undergrowth, she finally stepped into the wide clearing where her den was sitting.



Glancing down in embarrassment, she gestured to the den. “Well, we’re here.”

Dingo looked at the den, his eyes growing wide with surprise. “You live *here*?”

She shuffled her paws. “Well, yeah. I mean, I know it’s not much, but...”

He blinked in shock. “Not much? This is the biggest den I’ve ever seen!”

Saderia blinked in surprise and stared up at the stony den. A memory of the tiny rock dens she had seen scattered across the dingoes’ camp flashed through her mind, making her feel a twinge of appreciation toward her den. It might be a step down from her previous home, but it was a bigger step up from the primitive dens in the rugged desert.

Shaking off her feelings, she pricked her ears at the sound of paw steps and glanced at the den. The soft, almost inaudible voices of her family members floated over to her and she looked around wildly for a place to hide Dingo. Her eyes landed on a concealing clump of dark green bushes sitting just outside the den. “You can wait in there,” she hissed, tapping him on the shoulder and gesturing toward the bushes.

Dingo glanced at the undergrowth and nodded. Flattening his ears, he pushed his way into the tiny clump of undergrowth with a soft rustle of leaves. The bush trembled as he turned and sat down. His tail disappeared into the leafy brush, hiding him from sight.

A jolt of panic shot through her when he vanished behind the leafy branches, but when she looked closely, she could see his light brown eyes glowing through the leaves. Forcing herself to relax, she gestured for Dash to follow her to the den.

“Mom!” she called, standing just in front of the bush hiding Dingo and trying to make her shaky voice sound normal. “Cia! Uncle Jash! We’re home!”

The voices sounding from inside the den abruptly cut off and the three tigers stumbled outside. Their eyes widened in shock when they saw Saderia and Dash.

“Saderia!” Karenisha’s eyes lit up. “We thought you weren’t coming back.”

She managed a weak smile. "Of course we were coming back. Dash and I fell into pitfalls, but we're fine now that we're out. We're just a little hungry."

Cia and Uncle Jash let out a shaky breath. "Thank goodness!" her aunt exclaimed.

Without a word, Karenisha darted forward to press up against them, her dull eyes squeezing shut. "I told you it was dangerous in the forest."

Suppressing a sigh, Saderia managed a soft smile before pulling back. After a long moment of hesitation, she quickly began telling them about how she and Dash had gone exploring and fallen into pitfalls where they had managed to climb out themselves. Her eyes darted back to the bush hiding Dingo every few minutes to make sure she could still see the faint gleam of his eyes through the shadowy leaves.

"Well, I'm glad you made it out okay," Cia murmured when they had finished. "Now come inside and eat, then go to bed. You must be famished and exhausted."

A jolt of alarm raced down Saderia's spine and she opened her mouth to protest, but Dash flicked his tail across her mouth to stop her. Smiling, he gave them a slight nod. "We are. We'll get something to eat, then go to bed." When Cia nodded approvingly and turned to lead the way inside, Dash leaned close to Saderia. "This will only take a minute. We'll eat, then pretend to go to bed. He'll be out here when we get back, I promise."

Nodding weakly, she reluctantly stepped toward the den, casting one last glance at Dingo. Padding rapidly toward the rocky table, she and Dash grabbed a piece of food and wolfed it down as fast as they could. Karenisha, Cia, and Uncle Jash stood behind them, watching them to make sure they were okay.

Making herself smile up at her family members, Saderia feigned a soft yawn. "Well, I'm full now and it's really late. We should get to bed."

Cia let out a soft sigh. "A marvelous idea." Flicking her tail, she padded toward her own bedroom with Uncle Jash close behind her. Karenisha let her lifeless gaze linger on them for a moment longer before she reluctantly crept off toward her own bedroom.

Saderia followed her with her eyes until she finally laid down on her bed and turned her back to them. Breathing a sigh of relief, she glanced into

her aunt and uncle's room and realized their breathing had grown steady with sleep. Giving Dash a soft flick of her tail, she raced toward the entrance of the den, being careful not to make a sound. Racing around the corner of her house and ignoring the cool blast of frigid air, she darted toward the bush and nearly ran into Dingo when he stepped out of it.

She skidded to a halt and her face burned with embarrassment. "Sorry."

He grinned and waved it away with a flick of his tail. "It's fine. How did it go?"

She shrugged and looked up to meet his gaze, her heart glowing with relief. "It went fine. My family is asleep. Right now I have a lot of questions."

He sighed. "I was afraid of that." Sitting back against the ground, he met her gaze as steadily as he could. "All right, ask."

Saderia hesitated, then narrowed her eyes in wonder. "What were the 'complications' that kept you away from us for six months?"

Dingo's tail gave an extra forceful flick. "Next question."

She frowned in confusion. "What? Why? Can't you just tell us?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Next question," he repeated, his voice taking on an edge.

Saderia let out a soft sigh, but when she looked up at him, she felt a tingle of amazement when she began to realize it was truly him. His voice sounded the same, he looked just like he always had, and she could detect the same twinge of grumpiness hiding behind his shadowed gaze. After studying him for a long time, she let her gaze drift down to the old book tied around his neck. "You still carry Claw's journal?"

Dingo narrowed his eyes and looked away. "Of course. She was my sister. I couldn't leave her legacy behind."

Saderia nodded, her eyes glimmering with sympathy. "I understand." Letting her voice trail off, she sat awkwardly in front of him, searching for something to say to break the silence. "How are your other brothers, Rip and Tear?" she murmured.

Dingo sighed. "As good as they can be, I guess. They're not dead, and that's something. Rip wasn't doing well, at first, and I guess I can't blame him. Bone...well, Rip sort of looked up to him and I suppose he never thought I could have...done what I did." He shook his head. "He's

fine now, though. He's like the rest of them and he got over it pretty quickly. Tear got over it, too, and he and Rip usually hang out together."

Dash glanced up at him with curious amber eyes. "So what's going on with the pack? After..." He broke off when Dingo's light brown eyes flashed and let his sentence hang unfinished even though they all knew he meant 'after Dingo killed Bone.'

Dingo narrowed his eyes at him before giving an uneasy flick of his tail. "Bad things are going on with the pack. Nothing new, I suppose, but still. After they buried Bone, Dagger appointed Rock as his new Second in Command. Rock was Bone's 'best friend' or at least as much of a best friend as one can be to Bone. Rock was kind of mad at first when Bone... uh, didn't live long enough to make him Second in Command, so he acted a little remorseful about the whole thing for a little while. At least until Dagger appointed him Second in Command anyway. His grief seemed to magically disappear when that happened. Even more so when Dagger died two days later."

Saderia nodded uncomfortably, not sure whether to say she was sorry about the loss of his father or not. Unlike Dash, Dingo didn't seem to feel anything about the death of his father and she knew his parents didn't mean much to him after all they had done to him. His apathy was just a dingo thing. In the desert, death was a major part of life.

Dingo sighed. "Anyway, after Dagger died, the pack held a huge funeral for their Leader at night. The next day, Rock took over as the new Leader and since then, things have...changed. It hasn't really gotten that much worse for the pack itself considering their long line of cruel Leaders, but Rock acts as if he's all powerful now...which unfortunately, he is. He seems to exile anyone who looks at him funny. A lot of dingoes are outcasts now because of him, but the rest of the pack follows him because they don't want to be exiled." He rolled his eyes. "I suppose not much has actually changed apart from Rock exiling dingoes as a daily routine, whereas Dagger at least tried to keep a cap on the number of outcasts, as much as he enjoyed throwing them out. The only major change is that now it's Rock who's going mad with power instead of someone else."

"Oh," Saderia murmured, unsure of what else to say. She stared up at Dingo with wide, incredulous eyes when she recognized the sardonic

tone in his voice. It really was Dingo who was standing in front of her. Everything happening around her truly was real.

*Expect the unexpected.*

A small smile spread across her face. Claw had known all along. Glancing up at Dingo, she felt the smile fade when she wondered why it had taken so long for him to find her. After a long hesitation, she slowly met his gaze. "Dingo...I know it upsets you, but I really want to know what complications kept you from seeing us for six months."

Dingo closed his eyes and looked away with a long sigh. Saderia's eyes narrowed with unease and a rush of worry spread through her when she wondered if she had turned him away when she finally had a chance to see him again.

Dingo stared at his paws and stayed silent for what felt like hours before he finally spoke in a voice that was soft and raw with pain. "Is the fact that I killed my brother complicated enough for you?" He looked up with dark, narrowed eyes. "Do you think it was easy for me after that? For twelve years, I've preached about how the pack should change their ways and how violence and *murder* were wrong...and look what I've done. My brother is buried six feet under the sand and I've still got his blood on my paws."

He shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut. "Do you have any idea what that's like? I thought I could never do anything like that, but evidently I can, seeing as how fast I was to get rid of *him*. Now I'm no different than he was and I'm exactly the way the pack wanted me to be. I'm nothing more than a murdering piece of scum like he was." He opened his eyes and gazed down at his paws with wild, clouded light brown eyes. "I didn't know what to do after that. I still don't. I hated myself...even more than before, at least. And I kept seeing it. I kept seeing what I did to him. Over and over and over again. I couldn't get it out of my head. It was driving me crazy." He narrowed his eyes and shivered. "I couldn't face you two again, not after what I had done. I wanted to, but I just couldn't. I was terrified you would think I was a monster." He let out a long sigh and let his shoulders sag in defeat. "I wouldn't blame you if you do think that, but like I said, I couldn't face you after that. That was one of the complications."

Saderia felt her heart ache with pain. "We don't think you're a monster, Dingo."

He narrowed his eyes and lashed his tail. "Then you're either stupid or blind."

She leaned forward and gently rested her tail on his shoulder. "He killed your sister. And tormented you for years."

Dingo squeezed his eyes shut. "It doesn't matter what he did to me, and even though he killed Claw, it doesn't give me an excuse to go rip his throat out. Now I'm no different than the guy who destroyed my sister. If that's not a monster, I don't know what is."

Saderia let out a soft sigh and met his watery gaze. "Yes, you are different. You didn't do it just because of the dingoes he killed, but also because of the families of those dingoes that were hurt, as well. You did it because Bone didn't deserve his position as Second in Command and the power he had after all the horrible things he did to get them. It wasn't as if the fight was your idea anyway. If you hadn't fought back and struck first, you would have been killed. Even if you had escaped and you both had left the fight alive, he would have *never* stopped hounding you and looking for new ways to ruin you."

Dingo let out a low growl. "Who cares? I was nearly killed by those eight other dingoes anyway. Even before the fight, I knew if he didn't kill me, someone else would."

"But they didn't." Saderia stared up at him with a serious but sympathetic gaze. "Besides, you never do think of yourself anyway. I know why you fought him and you're way different from him. Bone killed to get power and to destroy his enemies. You did it to save us because you knew he would come after us even if we did escape. You knew that even if he killed you or if you escaped, he would chase us because of all the times we managed to outwit him. More than anything else, you did it to protect us."

Dingo blinked in surprise and stared at her for a long moment of silence. Shaking his head slowly, he let out a soft growl and his shadowed eyes grew a little friendlier. "How do you win an argument when your opponent knows *everything*?"

Saderia smiled and gave him a gentle flick of her tail. "Neither of us are judging you, Dingo. We're grateful you saved us. We would have been killed if it wasn't for you."

He hesitated, then managed a grateful look, his eyes seeming a bit lighter.

She smiled kindly. “You said that was one complication. Were there others?”

“Yeah,” he muttered, relieved to change the subject. “Rock knows I’m alive.”

Dash blinked in shock. “What? I thought you said they thought you were dead!”

Dingo rolled his eyes. “*Most* of them do. Rock doesn’t. The story I pieced together is that after the dingoes left my ‘dead’ body lying in the sand, Rock came back out of spite. He thought he wasn’t going to be Second in Command now that Bone, his one-way ticket to power, was dead. That thought didn’t exactly make him the happiest dingo in the desert, so out of anger that he couldn’t really take out on anyone else, he was planning on pushing what was left of me into the Snake Pit so the snakes could at least have a nice lunch. But by the time he got back to me to drag me there, I had already left. Obviously dead bodies don’t get up and move, so he assumed I was still alive.” He shook his head with a sarcastic sigh. “No one else believes him about me being alive, but that doesn’t mean they don’t follow his orders. Rock made it his goal in life to hunt me down even though he became leader regardless of Bone’s death. As stupid as he is, he realized that I’ve been trying to get to this forest to see if you were living here, so he decided to put dingoes all along the outskirts of the forest on orders to capture me if they see me. I’ve managed to stay out of their sight, so they still think I’m dead and just assume Rock’s crazy, but they have still managed to chase me off without realizing it. I couldn’t afford to be seen. They would come after me and get the job done right the next time.”

Seeming more at ease on the topic of his own death, he flicked his tail. “It was hard for me to find an opening in Rock’s defenses and he and the others unknowingly chased me off across the desert. They chased me to places so far away from camp that it took me a long time to get back to the edge of the forest. I had to keep moving because they were always hunting me, so I left my old den behind—Rock found out about it. Rock hunting me down has been the major reason why I wasn’t able to find you sooner.”

Dash stared at him in incredulity. “Why can’t they just leave you alone?”

Dingo rolled his eyes. “I’ve been asking myself that for twelve years, Dash.”

Saderia sighed, but when she looked up to face him, she felt her heart skip. Now that she knew why he had taken so long to find them, she could finally believe it was truly him. He acted, sounded, and looked exactly the way she remembered. He was truly back.

Tears stung the corners of her eyes and she stumbled forward to press against him. “We missed you so much,” she murmured. “I was so upset I couldn’t think straight for months. It was hard to do anything, especially in the first month. It was horrible trying to go on when I thought you were gone.”

Dingo blinked in surprise and tentatively patted her back. “I didn’t know you would miss me that much. I...I’m sorry. There’s just been a lot to deal with and...”

“It’s okay,” she interrupted, pulling away and giving him a slight smile. “I understand. I learned to deal with the grief and I’m just glad you’re back now.”

Dingo let out a soft sigh. “I missed you both, too.” Glancing over to the side, he smiled and flicked Dash with his tail.

Dash managed a weak smile. “Life was really hard when we thought you were gone. We’re really glad you’re back. We did miss you a lot.”

He looked down. “I’m sorry. But now that you know I’m alive, what do we do?”

Saderia frowned. “What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “Well, I suppose I’ve got to go back to the desert...”

“What are you, crazy?” Dash interrupted, gaping at him in disbelief. “Dingoes are trying to kill you and you want to go back?”

Dingo flicked his tail sharply. “I don’t *want* to go back. And dingoes have always been trying to kill me. It’s not that terrifying anymore.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “Maybe, but it’s even more dangerous now and I’m not letting you leave. Ever. I’m not letting you risk getting killed again.”

Dingo flattened his ears. “Well, what else am I supposed to do?”

Dash narrowed his eyes. “We asked you a long time ago.”

“Yeah,” Saderia murmured, her eyes misting over. “Come live with us.”

Dingo blinked at them in surprise. “You actually meant it?”

She frowned. “Of course we meant it. We’re your friends.”



Dingo stared at her in amazement, then slowly let his gaze wander to the trees and the dense undergrowth surrounding the clearing. A tiny shiver raced down his spine and his eyes narrowed with doubt and uncertainty. "I don't know if I could get used to living in a place like this where it's so...enclosed with all those trees towering over me. I mean, this forest is so different. And it would be one thing to live in your normal forest, but to live in *this* one? I'd have to be insane...but then again, I guess that's already covered."

Blinking in surprise, she felt her fur start to prickle. "What do you mean by that?"

He tore his gaze off the trees and frowned. "Hmm?"

Her mind whirled with wonder when memories returned to her. "Back in the desert," she stammered, "when we lived in your den and you were trying to help us find our father...you knew about this forest all along, didn't you? But you never told us. Why? And what do you mean by saying you would have to be insane to live in *this* forest?" She hesitated. "Back in that fight, why did Bone say he wouldn't go near the 'weird forest'? I know he meant this forest. Why would he be so afraid of *this* forest?"

Dingo blinked at her in shock and let silence spread out between them for a long moment. After a lingering pause, he finally glanced down at his paws. "You don't miss anything, do you? All right, fine, I'll tell you. The dingoes have stories we pass on about this place, sort of like the stories we pass on about the Snake Pit. This forest is cursed."

A shiver of alarm raced up Saderia's spine.

Dash stared at him in amazement. "What do you mean by cursed?"

He shrugged. "That's the way the dingoes see it. I don't know much about forests, but doesn't this one seem a bit different from your old one?"

"Yes," Saderia murmured, feeling a chill. "Very, very different."

"I can imagine," he muttered. "This forest shouldn't even technically be here. Do you want to hear the story of how it *did* appear?" When they nodded eagerly, he hesitated for a long moment. "Well, many years ago, humans came here."

Saderia's eyes widened. "Humans?"

"Yes, humans." He paused and studied them carefully. "About a century ago, this forest didn't exist. This entire land was nothing but desert back then. Have you noticed how this forest seems to be surrounded on all

sides by desert and have you found it a little strange that it could just pop up in the middle of the sand?” They nodded slowly and he let out a soft sigh. “Well, like I said, it’s because this entire forest used to be desert. The stories say that a river used to run through this place and the dingoes used to come here to drink water. But then the humans came. They had these big silver things with bars...”

“Cages,” Dash murmured.

“Okay. The humans were carrying huge cages and inside of them were animals. Some of them were forest food—I mean forest animals—but others were smaller...and weirder. Some of them were green and they had this strange webbing between their toes.”

“Frogs,” Saderia cut in.

“Right. They had frogs and they also had a few birds like the vultures in the desert, only smaller and a bit more pleasant to look at. I think they might have even had a snake or two and I don’t know how they managed to get it. They brought a lot of plants, too. Anyway, the humans set up a camp right here by the river that used to run through the desert by putting up these tan triangular dens they called tents. According to the stories, the dingoes that lived back then discovered them and kept their distance but came back every day to watch them. The first few days, the humans set up the cages, but after a while, they started doing...strange things to the plants and animals.”

Saderia frowned uneasily, while Dingo narrowed his eyes. “They had these weird, long, clear things they called test tubes and they were filled with some shiny green liquid. The dingoes were really baffled and they stuck around to see what it was. The humans fed the green stuff to the animals and according to the stories, the dingoes had never heard such painful screams. Considering they’re dingoes who torture outcasts for fun, that’s saying something. Some of the dingoes discovered journals in the human camp and stole them. A few of them learned to read human language to find out what was going on. According to the journal, the humans were doing ‘chemical experimentation’ on the animals and they were doing it out in the desert so it wouldn’t hurt any other humans.

“As the dingoes watched, the animals in the cages started to... change. Some died. Some grew extra limbs or changed color. The dingoes had never seen anything like it. Even they were a bit horrified by it, but they

kept watching with a kind of gruesome fascination. Every day they came back to see what the humans would do next. But then one day something happened. One of the humans came out of a tent carrying a bunch of different test tubes with all kinds of different colors, but as they walked toward the center of the camp where the animals were, they tripped on something and fell, breaking the test tubes apart and spilling all the ‘chemicals’ on the ground. The instant the chemicals mixed together, a massive explosion erupted right there in the human camp. The dingoes ran for their lives and hid, but when the smoke finally cleared, this forest was in the process of forming. Strange, multicolor grass had begun to grow over the sand and weird plants were starting to grow. As for the animals that were trapped in the cages...we can only imagine what happened to them. The dingoes all assumed they were dead at first, but after this forest had begun to grow even bigger, the dingoes walked by it and heard strange animal noises coming from deep inside it. The dingoes guessed that some had survived, but not without eerie mutations. No one wanted to go near the forest after that and they decided the river that ran through here must have been poisoned anyway, so they decided to come up with another way of getting water—thus we started collecting rainwater.” Dingo trailed off with dark, uneasy eyes. “That’s basically the story of how this forest appeared and why the dingoes stay away. It was formed by something dangerous and we can only imagine the creatures that might live here.”

A shiver raced down Saderia’s spine. “That’s some story...” Letting her voice trail off, she suddenly pictured Jeb and felt a tingle of shock. He had pitch black stripes like a tiger, a tail tuft like a lion, and webbed feet like a frog, as if all three animals had been merged together into one. His kind must be the mutated animals that had resulted from the explosion. All the animals that had been trapped in the cages must have somehow ‘mixed’ together to create the kraguers. The plants that the humans had brought with them must have mutated in the explosion, as well, and created the strange, multicolor plants that covered the forest. The explosion also had to have poisoned the rivers and maybe even given them whatever strange chemical caused them to flood. Some of the disasters might have somehow resulted from the mixed chemicals.

Blinking in shock, she felt a tingle of amazement that she had finally uncovered the secret of the forest. After a moment of hesitation, she met

Dingo's gaze and shrugged nonchalantly. "We actually met one of the mutants here in the forest."

Dingo's eyes widened in shock. "What?"

"We did," she replied, giving him a slight smile. "He's nice, too. His name's Jeb."

He gaped at her in disbelief. "You made friends with it?"

She frowned. "What's so wrong with that?"

Dingo blinked several times. "Uh...nothing, I guess. Is he weird?"

She shrugged. "Well, he does look a little strange. He looks like a combination of a tiger, a lion, and a frog if you can visualize that. It gets less weird after you see him a few times." Ignoring his stunned look, she narrowed her eyes. "It doesn't matter though. Are you going to agree to stay with us? I am not letting you go back to the desert."

Blinking a few times, he shifted uncomfortably. "Where exactly would I stay?"

"With us."

He raised an eyebrow. "Then you might want to tell your parents. I don't think they would miss a dingo walking through their house."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine, we'll tell them tomorrow. But you *are* staying here."

Dingo frowned and glanced around at all the trees, a tiny shiver racing through his fur. "I don't know if I like this. I don't like this place. Even less so if there really *are* tiger...lion...frog mutant things running around in it." He hesitated, then let out a sigh. "But I guess I've got no choice. If the dingoes don't kill me for going back to the desert, you probably will." Giving her a slight grin, he tried to suppress a sigh. "Have you really been living in *this* forest for six months? What's been going on while I was gone?"

"Yes, we've been living here for six months...and it hasn't exactly been easy." Saderia hesitated before beginning her story. She told him how hard it had been to settle into her new home and about the disasters that ravaged the forest. Her eyes darkened when she described the times they had been sabotaged and the investigations they had done. A lingering flicker of fear burned in her heart when she told him about the sickness that had spread like wildfire and forced Dash and the sick animals into the fortress. Dingo winced with sympathy and shock when she explained how

close Dash had come to dying. Eventually, she ended her story by describing how she had discovered the kraguers.

Dingo stared at her in amazement when she finally trailed off and finished her tale. "That's...incredible," he stammered. "You've really gone through all of *that*?"

She smiled sadly. "We have been through a lot lately, but..." Her eyes drifted to his belly as she spoke and a sudden jolt of shock raced through her when she realized how gaunt he was. "Wait a minute, if you've been on the run...have you had any time to eat?"

He blinked in surprise, then shrugged. "Not really, but it's not that big of a deal."

"Look at your ribs!" she exclaimed, her eyes widening in horror. She had gotten so used to him looking so worn and ragged in the desert that she had almost forgotten she could do something about it now in the forest. "Aren't you starving?"

He frowned. "I've been starving since I was born. I don't notice it anymore."

Dash glanced back and forth between her and Dingo. "I'll go get some food."

Dingo opened his mouth to protest, but before he could speak, Dash darted into the den, disappearing behind the rocky wall. The canine raised an eyebrow at the spot where Dash had disappeared. "You two don't have to make such a fuss. I'm fine."

Saderia narrowed her eyes in a challenge. "When was the last time you ate?"

Dingo blinked and stayed silent, seeming to count in his head. After a long hesitation, he finally blinked out of his haze. "Four days ago." He shrugged. "So what?"

She gaped at him in disbelief. "Four days ago?" She broke off at the sound of paw steps and turned around to see Dash race out of the den, carrying several pieces of food.

Skidding to a halt, Dash dropped the food in front of Dingo. "Here you go."

Dingo glanced at the food and frowned. "This is food?"

"Yes, it's forest food," Saderia replied, feeling her face burn with embarrassment when she realized what she had said.

Dingo raised an eyebrow and grinned before turning back to the food. “Whatever,” he murmured. “It can’t hurt, right?” After a moment of hesitation, he leaned down to take a bite out of the food. “Hmm. It’s not bad, it’s not good, just different.”

Dash let out a sigh. “Well, that’s all we have, so you should get used to it.”

He shrugged and wolfed down a piece of the food before sitting back up and licking his chops. “I can do that. I don’t really care what I eat. I’m just worried about living in this forest in general. I mean...” His gaze wandered to the trees towering above them and he shuddered. “How do you deal with all these trees? They’re *everywhere*. I feel like I can’t even breathe. This place is just *weird*.”

A tingle of worry raced through her when she wondered if he would be miserable here. Narrowing her eyes, she shrugged. “That will pass...I think.”

Dash looked up at the sound of her uncertain tone and smiled. “Don’t worry, Saderia, it’s Dingo. Just let him grouch about it for a while and get it out of his system.”

Dingo let out a loud laugh and grinned. “Dash has got the right idea!” He paused and chuckled before rolling his eyes and fading back into seriousness. “Anyway, on another topic, how are things with your family? I saw three tigers...who are they?”

“My Mom was the one with amber eyes,” Saderia explained. “The Queen. The other two with blue eyes were my Aunt Cia and Uncle Jash.”

“Ah. So where’s your Dad? His name’s Makero, right?”

“Er...right.” She paused, then carefully explained how Makero had left to cross the desert to investigate their old forest for any sign of the hunters.

Dingo blinked in surprise, then frowned in sympathy. “I hope he’s all right.”

A weak, uncertain smile spread across her face. “Me too.” She started to say something else, then broke off in a long, weary yawn.

Dingo smiled. “Looks like you’re pretty tired. We’ve been up for a long time. Maybe it’s time you two got some sleep.”

Saderia frowned. “But...”

He held up a paw to stop her. "We can talk more in the morning. I'm not going anywhere. Do you want me to sleep out here?"

Saderia narrowed her eyes. "No way! You'll sleep in our room." She gestured toward the den with a flick of her tail. "Come on, I'll show you."

Dingo snickered and raised an eyebrow. "All right, but don't blame me if your Mom panics when she sees a dingo in your room."

She rolled her eyes and turned around to lead the way while Dash and Dingo followed her. Padding across the stony floor, she led them past the jagged entrance into her room and saw Dingo's eyes widen in amazement. "This is our bed," she said, gesturing to the huge rock. "You can sleep up here if you want."

He blinked, then shook his head. "No, you sleep up there. I'll sleep on the floor like I used to back when you were living in my den."

A small smile spread across her face. "Well...all right. Goodnight, Dingo."

He grinned. "Goodnight, Saderia. Goodnight, Dash."

"Goodnight," Dash murmured, leaping up onto the bed while Saderia climbed up after him. Laying down on her side, she watched Dingo untie the pink ribbon around his neck and set Claw's journal on the floor. After a moment of circling the ground, he flopped down on his side and closed his eyes, letting his head rest on his paws.

Feeling her eyelids begin to droop, Saderia gazed at him for a moment longer before slowly closing her eyes and falling back into a world of darkness.

"You knew, Claw," she whispered into the blackness.

A playful giggle echoed around her. "I did. Now you know why it would have ruined the surprise if I had told you."

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## New Journey

The darkness slowly began to fade, revealing a wide, blurry desert. Blinking rapidly, Saderia smiled when she saw a light brown dingo gradually fade into view. Claw met her gaze and padded across the wispy, sandy ground, a tiny smile spreading across her face. "I'm glad you found Dingo again," she murmured, her eyes lighting up. "He was so happy when he found you and Dash." She heaved a long sigh. "It's good he's got you again. He really needs you to cheer him up...He can never seem to win."

Saderia sighed. "You're talking about what happened between Dingo and Bone."

"Of course." Claw glanced down at her paws, her eyes clouding with sadness. "It was bound to come down to something like that sooner or later. I've been watching him for a long time after it happened. I know how terrified he is that I won't like him anymore. I wish I could tell him he's just making it harder for himself with those thoughts. I could never love him less no matter what he did. He's *nothing* like Bone."

Saderia's ears drooped and she nodded sadly.

Silence spread out between them before Claw shook her head and looked up with a weak smile. "Anyway, I'm sure he'll be happier with you around." She paused, her eyes lighting up with excitement. "It seems all the members of the prophecy have assembled."

Saderia blinked in surprise and tipped her head to the side. "You mean all of my friends *are* part of the prophecy? I mean, I know I'm part of the prophecy and so is Dash, and I'm sure Dingo is, and Jeb...I think he is, too. And then you..."

Claw grinned and nodded. "That's right. Five of us."

Saderia's eyes widened with amazement. "So all of us are part of the prophecy?"

She shrugged. "As far as I know. I spoke to a few of your ancestors a while back and they all seem to think so." She grinned. "So now that



you've managed to gather them all, bring them together. A journey might help you all get to know each other."

A clever smile spread across Saderia's face. "You knew Dingo was alive. That's why you wanted me to wait before I left. Now that he's back, he'll be able to lead us through the desert to find my father, so he's the unexpected guide you mentioned that would lead us and fight for us." She hesitated and frowned uneasily. "There's just one thing I don't like about this. Dingo is being hunted down by that new Leader...Rock. I don't want to put him in danger by bringing him out into the desert again."

Claw waved away her worries with a flick of her tail. "Dingo can take care of himself. Whenever the dingoes of the pack go out to hunt for food or enemies, they usually go in groups of three or four. You'll have enough forces to fight them off. My brother's not helpless. Once he gets his strength back, he'll be ready to handle anything."

Saderia frowned in uncertainty. "I don't know. He also said there were dingoes guarding the border between the forest and the desert. How are we supposed to get past them?" She paused, then felt her eyes widen in alarm. "How did my Dad get past them?"

Claw held up a paw. "Relax. The new Leader, Rock, can only afford to waste so many dingoes looking for someone they think is dead. Sometimes his defenses are weak, and Makero was lucky enough to pick a time when there were few of them guarding it. As for how *you* are going to leave...this is where having a ghost friend comes in handy."

Saderia's eyes lit up with gratitude. "Thanks, Claw."

Claw grinned. "You're welcome. Here's what you need to do when you leave. Go to the exact place where you first came to this forest and go straight through the desert. You shouldn't run into any guards if you go to that exact spot because they've been placed a few feet away from there. The sand dunes are just high enough and the dingoes are just far enough away that you should be able to get past them without being seen."

Saderia nodded slowly. "Thanks. I'll remember that."

Claw frowned. "I'm sure you will, but I have to warn you. The guards are shifted to a new position every few days. You have only two days before they shift again."

Saderia blinked in shock. "I thought you said not to rush."

A sly smile spread across her face. "I changed my mind. Besides, I told you not to rush because I had to wait for Dingo to find you. Now you can go as fast as you like."

Rolling her eyes with a playful smile, Saderia let out a long sigh. "All right. Well, who should I take on this journey?"

"That's up to you to decide."

She frowned thoughtfully. "Well, I'll take Dash, of course. I wouldn't go anywhere without him. And Dingo's definitely going. And..." She hesitated uncertainly. "I want to take Jeb, too, to get to know him better since he might be part of the prophecy, but..." She trailed off and felt a sudden sense of warning crash down on her. Feeling a shiver of worry, she suddenly knew that Jeb *had* to come with them. Trying to shake off her Dream sense's eerie warning, she looked up at Claw. "Actually, I *know* I should take Jeb with us. But he's so afraid of 'The Land Beyond the Forest' that I doubt he'll come."

Claw shrugged. "Don't worry. He will."

Saderia blinked in surprise. "What? How do you know?"

Claw's light brown eyes twinkled in the dim light. "I have a hunch. I've been watching Jeb lately and he seems pretty happy to have friends again. After all that's happened in the forest, he seems a bit sick of it. He's still afraid, of course, but after all the pleasant stories you told him about your old forest, he might be persuaded."

Saderia smiled gratefully. "Thanks. I hope so. Time to wake up?"

She nodded and grinned. "See you later, Saderia. Good luck." Waving goodbye, the spirit slowly started to fade and the blurry desert gradually dissolved into darkness.

Sunlight streamed into the den, casting a warm glow across Saderia's fur and stinging her eyes when she blinked them open. Letting out a silent yawn, she opened her eyes and raised her head to look around at her rocky den. Glancing down at the ground beneath her, she felt a warm, happy smile spread across her face when she saw Dingo lying on the stony floor, his eyes closed and his tail twitching in his sleep.

"Saderia?"

Blinking, she slowly turned around and grinned when she saw Dash sitting close beside her, watching her with warm amber eyes. "Good

morning, Dash.”

He gave her a weak smile. “Good morning.” Glancing over at Dingo’s sleeping form, he let out a sigh. “Do you have everything figured out yet? Because I don’t.”

She smiled. “I think so.” Pulling herself up, she lowered her voice so as not to wake up her sleeping friend. “All right, we already know Dingo’s story and we also need a dingo to guide us across the desert. I’m almost certain Dingo will say yes if we ask him to help us find Dad. The journey will be a lot quicker with Dingo to help us and I learned from Claw that Dad only set out about two days ago. I also know that Dad is in some sort of a situation that we have to help him out of. Claw told me when and how to get past the dingoes that are waiting on the border between the desert and the forest and we’ll have to wing it from there, but I don’t think we should worry. If Claw was telling me to go on the journey, it can’t be too dangerous. I doubt she would put her brother in too much danger.”

Saderia broke off and hesitated. “I also found all the animals that somehow have to do with the prophecy: me, you, Dingo, Jeb, and Claw. They’re the ones I need to come with us on our journey across the desert, so we’ll have to try to convince Jeb to come with us today.” She paused for another long beat of silence. “We have to leave tonight.”

Dash stared at her in shock. “*Tonight?*”

“Yes,” she murmured uneasily. “You’ll come with me...won’t you?”

He blinked. “Of course! But what about your family? What will they think?”

Saderia bit her lip, a tingle of worry racing down her spine. “That’s one of the things I’m worried about. I guess we’ll just have to leave them a note. That’s the best we can do. I’m really worried about my Dad and I want to get moving as soon as possible.”

Behind them, Dingo suddenly lifted his head. “What are you whispering about?”

Saderia jumped, then turned to face him with an embarrassed look. “Oh, sorry, we were just...” She paused and glanced down at her paws before letting out a sigh. “Do you remember what I told you about my Dad leaving the forest? Well, I had a Dream a few nights ago and I saw my Dad getting hurt in the desert. I’ve wanted to go look for him for a long time, but I felt I should wait because I didn’t want to end up lost. Now that you’re

here...I don't want to rush you or anything...but could you...lead us across the desert?"

Dingo blinked in surprise, then smiled. "Of course. When are we heading out?"

She hesitated in unease. "Well...I was thinking of leaving tonight."

Dingo nodded eagerly. "That sounds fine. Let me know when you're ready to go."

She stared at him in surprise before slowly shaking her head. "Okay, that's good. I also wanted you to meet that, um, mutant I was telling you about before we leave. I think he's part of the prophecy I told you about. I think you're part of the prophecy, too."

Dingo blinked in shock. "Me? I thought the prophecy was just you and Dash."

Saderia gave him a weak smile. "No, you're in it, too. I got the same feeling about you that I got for Dash when I met him and I know it means you're part of the prophecy. I get the same feeling about Jeb, too." And Claw. Trying not to wince, she bit her tongue to keep from spilling the news about the fifth member of the prophecy, knowing she couldn't tell Dingo about his sister's ghost yet. "You're all part of the prophecy."

Dingo opened his mouth to protest, then broke off and just shook his head. "If you say so. I'll just take your word for it. Have you really met a mutant, though?"

"Yes, we'll take you to meet him today. Just remember—his name's Jeb. We're used to you slipping and calling us forest food, but he might be offended."

He stared down at his paws in embarrassment. "Sorry."

She just shrugged and grinned. "It's all right. Come on, let's get the introductions over with. You stay here for now while I tell Mom, Cia, and Uncle Jash what's going on."

When Dingo nodded, she leapt down to the ground with Dash close behind her. Peeking out into the main room, she spotted her mother, aunt, and uncle sitting around the boulder table picking at pieces of food. Her heart sank when she realized her mother's eyes had grown even duller and her body had gotten almost as gaunt as Dingo's.

Biting back her unease, she tried to smile as she stepped toward her family. "Mom, Cia, Uncle Jash, I...I have someone to introduce you to."

Karenisha and her aunt and uncle looked up at her and frowned.

The Queen tipped her head to the side in confusion. "Hmm? What do you mean?"

Saderia took a deep breath. "Do you remember what I told you about Dingo?"

Cia's blue eyes narrowed with sympathy. "Yes, we remember."

She exchanged a glance with Dash before meeting their eyes. "He's not dead."

The three of them stared at her in shock, their eyes widening. Exchanging a glance with the others, Cia stood up and padded toward them with the others close behind her, her eyes beginning to narrow in concern. "What do you mean by that, Saderia?"

She sighed. "I mean, I thought he was dead, but he's come back. He's the one that saved me and Dash from those pitfalls last night, but I wanted to ask him a lot of questions, so I didn't introduce you right away." Seeing their worried, disbelieving glances, she narrowed her eyes. "I'm not crazy. I can show him to you."

Cia and Uncle Jash glanced at each other, their blue eyes narrowed in concern, while Karenisha stared dully at the wall, seeming unaffected. Ignoring the quiet muttering of her aunt and uncle, she glanced back into her room. "Dingo! Come out here!"

A moment of silence spread out between them until they heard the soft thud of paw steps. Dingo poked his head out from behind the rocky wall and cautiously stepped out to stand beside Saderia and Dash, staring up at the tigers with wide light brown eyes.

Cia and Uncle Jash gasped in shock and disbelief, while Karenisha glanced over at him with amber eyes twinkling with mild interest. None of them had ever actually seen Dingo, but from the descriptions Saderia had given them, they could all tell it was him.

Cia's eyes grew wide with amazement. "It really is him! Or...am I seeing things?"

Uncle Jash gaped in disbelief. "No, I see him, too!"

"Me too," Karenisha murmured. The Queen hesitated, then took a step forward to stand in front of Dingo. He straightened up immediately and looked up to meet her gaze. Glancing over at them, Saderia blinked in

surprise when she realized how much smaller Dingo was next to a full grown tiger than when he was standing next to her and Dash.

“Hello,” Karenisha said, holding out a paw. “I’m Karenisha, Saderia’s mother.”

Saderia, Cia, and Uncle Jash looked up at the Queen in shock, stunned that she seemed so unsurprised by Dingo’s appearance and acted so normal when he had seemed to ‘come back to life.’ After everything that had happened to her, though, Saderia realized that there was probably nothing that could surprise her mother anymore.

Dingo dipped his head respectfully. “Hello, Queen Karenisha.”

She gave him a slight smile. “Saderia’s close friends can just call me Karenisha. Feel free to make yourself at home. I’m sure you can work out where you’ll be sleeping with Saderia and Dash. You can take as much food as you like, as well.”

Cia gaped in disbelief. “You act like this is normal! He’s supposed to be dead!”

Saderia flicked her tail. “He’s not. To make a long story short, he fooled the dingoes into thinking he was dead and us, as well. He faked his death so he could survive. A few things have kept him from coming here, but all that matters is that he’s here now.”

Cia eyes widened in amazement. “This is unbelievable!”

Uncle Jash glanced at her and tried to hide a chuckle, the shock beginning to fade from his blue eyes. “Everything with Saderia is unbelievable. If Dreams and prophecies can exist, then I suppose animals coming back to life isn’t that big of a deal.”

Cia gaped in disbelief. “Has the world gone mad? Nothing makes any sense!”

“Which is why this is nothing new.” Uncle Jash grinned at her flustered expression. “Nothing ever makes sense around here, so since this makes absolutely no sense, it’s nothing out of the ordinary.”

She glared at him. “This is ludicrous.” She heaved a long sigh. “Fine, I suppose I’ll pretend like this is perfectly normal. Hi, Dingo, I’m Cia, Saderia’s aunt.”

Uncle Jash chuckled. “And I’m Jash, her uncle. I married into an insane family.”

Dingo grinned. "At least I'm not the only one who thinks Saderia's a little...odd."

Flicking him playfully with her tail, Saderia grinned and glanced up at her family. "Look, I know this should really require a lot of explaining, but I...well, Dash and I want to catch up with Dingo. Mom, you said you're fine with him staying here?" When Karenisha nodded, Saderia smiled and tried to hide a tingle of guilt when she realized he would only have to stay with them for the rest of the day. "Well, I'm sorry if this is rude, but I really want to catch up with Dingo and maybe show him around the forest a bit."

Karenisha's eyes darkened. "If you're suggesting leaving this house again..."

"But Mom..."

"Karenisha," Dash spoke up, flicking Saderia gently with his tail. "After falling into those pitfalls, we're both going to be extra careful. And besides, there are three of us now, so even if something does happen to one of us, one can stay with whoever is in trouble and one can run back to the den to ask you for help. We'll be fine."

Karenisha glared at him before letting out a long sigh. After a lingering beat of silence, she finally gave them a tired nod and stared down at her paws. "Fine. You have exactly one hour to explore and then come back here before I come looking for you."

Saderia nodded eagerly. "One hour. No longer." Glancing between Dash and Dingo, she gestured to the entrance and grinned. "Come on. Let's get going."

The two of them fell into step behind her when she turned and darted toward the entrance. Stepping out onto the dew-covered grass, she ducked into the dense woods. Walking with them close beside her, she began picking her way toward Jeb's Spring. She ducked under low tree branches and pulled her paw out of the weeds covering the ground, but when she looked over at Dingo, she realized it wasn't as easy for him. A low branch scratched across his face before he could move around it, and when a weed wound its way tightly around his paw, he leaned down and snarled at it.

Trying to hide both a giggle and a pang of worry, she paused. "Problems?"

Dingo rolled his eyes and yanked his paw away from the weeds, giving them a lingering glare. "Forests and I don't match."

She let out a soft sigh and flicked him gently with her tail, trying to stifle the fear that he wouldn't be happy in the forest. "You'll get used to it." Turning around, she started to lead the way, avoiding thick clumps of undergrowth to make it easier for Dingo. "Jeb's really nice. You'll probably scare him at first, Dingo, but he'll get used to you."

Dingo just shrugged, his eyes locked on the ground in deep concentration.

Hiding a smile, Saderia led the way and felt a warm glow of happiness. So much time had passed since she had spent time with Dingo. The thought of seeing him alive again was incredible. The thought of being able to go on adventures together with her two friends just like they used to in the past made her feel happier than she had in ages.

Sunlight glimmered down on the forest, glistening on the bright purple and orange leaves of the trees. Jeb sat close by the entrance to his Spring, his eyes darting worriedly back and forth. A twinge of unease crept down his spine as he waited for the creatures to arrive and he couldn't help but wonder if something bad had happened to them. Remembering the strange Dream Saderia had told him about, he felt a jolt of panic and looked around wildly for any sign of them, terrified that something bad had happened.

Turning in all directions, he froze when the sound of rapid paw steps rose in the air and gasped when Dash suddenly leapt out from a clump of bushes on the edge of the clearing. Jumping back, Jeb let out a tiny squeak of fear, then relaxed when he recognized the dark brown lion. He sat back and managed a tiny smile when Dash raced toward him.

"Hi, Dash!" he called, waving a paw. "Where's Saderia?"

Dash skidded to a halt and sat back, his eyes gleaming with joy and excitement. His tail twitched rapidly back and forth and a brilliant smile spread across his face, making Jeb blink in surprise and forget his worries. "Hi, Jeb," Dash said. "Saderia's waiting in the woods. She asked me to come ahead and talk to you about something."

Jeb frowned. "Why? Did something bad happen?"



Dash shook his head and grinned. “No, everything’s perfect! Saderia and I just recently found an old friend of ours and we wanted to introduce you to him. He’s big and weird-looking like us, though, so Saderia asked me to run ahead to warn you.”

“Oh, okay,” Jeb replied, feeling a tingle of unease. Telling himself that Saderia probably wouldn’t be friends with anyone dangerous, he managed a smile. “That’s fine.”

“Great!” Dash hesitated for a moment, then gave him a cautious look. “He looks a lot different from us, but he’s nice. You don’t mind, right?” When Jeb shook his head, Dash grinned and glanced back at the woods. “Saderia, you guys can come out now!”

Jeb looked up past Dash’s shoulder and smiled when he saw Saderia appear and pad toward them, then froze in shock when the other animal stepped out behind her. A jolt of alarm raced through him and his eyes grew wide with shock. Frozen in place, Jeb gaped at the animal in incredulity, feeling his fur begin to bristle in fear despite Dash’s warning. Trying to calm himself down and reminding himself that the animal was Saderia and Dash’s friend, he struggled to relax, but a feeling of shock and incredulity lingered.

The new animal had a long, narrow muzzle and stood even taller than Saderia and Dash. Long, bristly brown fur covered his skinny body. Eerie, old scars covered his face and his sides. His short, bushy tail flicked rapidly back and forth and his long, pointy ears pricked up in surprise. The animal’s light brown eyes widened as he stopped in front of Jeb. The two of them stared at each other in shock, unblinking and unable to look away.

Dingo stared at the strange animal with eyes wide with disbelief. His tail seemed to freeze in midair as he stared at the mutant creature. Blinking rapidly, he glanced at the animal’s tiger-like stripes, the lion-like tuft on its tail, and the frog-like webbing between its toes. At a loss for words, he stared at the creature for what felt like ages.

Saderia and Dash sat a few paces away in silence. Feeling a twinge of unease, Saderia couldn’t help but wonder if one of them would say something rude.

After a long moment of silence, Dingo seemed to blink out of his trance and courteously extended a paw. “Hi, Jeb. I’m Dingo.”

Jeb blinked in surprise and after a hesitation, he slowly reached forward to shake Dingo's paw. "Er, hi. What, um, *are* you?"

Dingo dropped his paw and tried to hide the shock in his eyes. "A dingo."

Jeb frowned in confusion. "But isn't your name...?"

"It's a long story." Dingo studied him curiously. "What are you?"

Jeb looked uneasily down at his paws. "A kraguer."

"Okay," Dingo replied, trying to hide the befuddlement in his calm voice.

Glancing up at him in surprise, Jeb managed a slight smile and seemed to relax.

Stepping forward, Saderia briefly told Jeb a little more about Dingo. She described all the different times he had saved them back in the desert and vaguely told him how Dingo was unacceptable by the pack's standards. Leaving out details about the pack and Bone and Claw, she told him as much as she could without scaring him off from the idea of journeying with them or upsetting Dingo.

Jeb blinked in amazement when she had finished. "Wow, that's incredible!" he gasped. "But why would these...dingoes not like you just because you were nice?"

"The pack is a bit backwards," Dash spoke up.

Dingo rolled his eyes. "To put it mildly."

Jeb frowned in confusion, then shook it off and managed a tentative smile when he turned back to Dingo. "Well, it's nice to meet you. I've never known a dingo before."

Dingo raised an eyebrow. "Nice to meet you, too. And believe me, I've never known a kraguer before."

Saderia grinned and felt her heart grow warm with happiness at the sight of all of her friends getting along. All of the members of the prophecy had finally been united. She gazed at them in silence, thinking of how different they all were. Dash was a dark lion with an evil father who had plotted to destroy the royal family; Dingo was a dog from a twisted desert pack bent on killing him and anyone like him; Jeb was a mutated creature from a forest formed out of an explosion; and watching her out of sight was Claw, a ghost who had been killed by her brother and who had offered to become her spirit guide.

When their voices faded away, she took a deep breath and looked down at her newest friend. "Jeb, I have something very important to ask you." He pricked his ears in surprise. "It might be a tough decision," she murmured, "but it's something I have to ask you. I told you a while back that my father went back to my old forest to see if there was a chance we might get it back and that one of my special Dreams predicted that he would run into danger. Ever since then I've wanted to go out into the desert to look for him and warn him or help him." She gestured toward her canine friend. "Dingo is from the desert and he knows the way through it by heart, so he'll be able to guide us. He and Dash have already agreed to come with me to search for my father. Will you come too?"

Jeb's eyes widened in shock. An overwhelming sense of horror washed over him and an instinctual jolt of fear shot down his spine, making the fur along his back rise up in alarm. Terrifying thoughts of The Land Beyond the Forest raced through his mind, making him shudder at images of slashing claws and horrifying creatures. Gaping in shock and disbelief, he stared up at Saderia with wide eyes, stunned at her question. "G-go into The Land Beyond the Forest?" he choked out. "But...it's dangerous!"

Saderia sighed. "Sometimes it is dangerous. But like I said, Dingo can navigate the desert and we all know how to fight. We can handle anything that threatens us."

He gaped in horror. How could she ask him to leave the one place he was safe?

Dash looked up at him with sympathetic eyes. "It's not like you would never come back. It would only take about a week or so, maybe more, but we *would* come back."

A whole week? Jeb stared at him in horror, through he couldn't help but feel a bit flattered that they had asked him to come. When he tried to think about it, he didn't really believe Saderia would lure him into danger, but he couldn't be sure. "Why would you want me to come?" That was the part he didn't understand. What good would he be on a journey when he was such a coward? He would probably just hold them back.

Saderia took a deep breath. "Do you remember the prophecy I told you about? Well, Dash is part of the prophecy and so is Dingo. But I think you're part of it too."

He gaped at them in shock. “Me? But that’s impossible! I’m not special!”

Dash grinned. “That’s what Saderia thought, too, and that wasn’t true.”

Feeling her face grow hot with embarrassment, she shot him a playful glare before turning back to Jeb. “I get this certain instinctual feeling for who’s in the prophecy and who’s not, and I got the same feeling for you that I got when I realized Dash and Dingo were in the prophecy. Dash thinks you’re part of the prophecy, too, right?” When Dash nodded, she gave him a slight smile. “You don’t have to really think about it that much. In fact, if you don’t try to over think it, it’s easier. Dingo doesn’t really bother with it or think about it. He’s just there as a great friend, right, Dingo?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, that stuff’s too complicated. I just let them deal with it.”

Saderia grinned. “See? We can still be great friends and you don’t even have to worry about the prophecy. But I do want you to know you’re a part of it.”

“But...” Jeb glanced around at Saderia, Dash, and Dingo with stunned blue/green eyes. He almost couldn’t believe he could actually be part of something so important. He blinked several times, trying to let the information sink in, then froze when a terrifying thought flashed through his mind. “Wait a minute...all of you are part of the prophecy and you’ve all traveled The Land Beyond the Forest. Does that mean that now that I’m part of the prophecy that I’ll have to go into The Land Beyond the Forest, too?”

Saderia glanced uneasily down at her paws. “Well...sort of.” She looked up when she heard Jeb let out a quiet whimper and met his gaze. “Dash and I did have to leave our forest and now Dingo has had to leave the desert, but it wasn’t exactly of our own choice. We wouldn’t ever force you to leave, especially not permanently. It’s all your decision.”

Dash gave him a sympathetic glance. “The main thing is that all three of us have been in The Land Beyond the Forest and we’ve all survived. No matter where we go, we all protect each other. That’s what friends do.”

Jeb shuddered at the thought of leaving the forest, but he couldn't help but feel a glow of happiness. The thought of having friends who would stick up for him made his heart grow warm with joy. All his life he had wished for friends like that, but Keruni hadn't been the most trustworthy animal. If Saderia and her friends were actually asking him to go with them, they must not think of him as a coward either. Somehow they must actually like him. Jeb looked at them with stunned eyes. Every one of them *had* survived being in The Land Beyond the Forest and the sincerity in their voices was easy to detect. Jeb shook himself. He must be *crazy* to even consider leaving the forest. And yet...

His own forest wasn't exactly a safe haven. Disasters ravaged the upper world and the outlaws were a constant, dangerous threat. Any day, one of them could snap the same way Secka had. Thinking about everything Saderia had told him about her old forest, he couldn't help but imagine a peaceful paradise completely different from his own home. More than a peaceful forest, he wanted true friends. He wasn't quite sure what to think of Dingo yet, but if he was a friend of Saderia and Dash, he had to be a good animal. All together, the three of them might be the best friends he had ever had.

Jeb shook his head, his mind whirling with confusion and indecision. Even with all of those reasons to assure him, he couldn't imagine leaving the forest. Just the thought of it was nerve-wracking. And what about his parents? What would they think?

"When are you leaving?" he murmured.

Saderia shifted uncomfortably. "Well...tonight. I'm sorry about the short notice, but we really have to move quickly."

*Tonight?* Jeb's eyes grew wide with shock. He couldn't imagine getting up the courage to even *consider* leaving in less than twenty-four hours, but to his surprise, he heard himself mutter, "I'll...I'll have to think about it."

Saderia gave him a grateful smile. "Okay, I understand. How about we come to you right before we head out so you can tell us your answer?"

"All right," he murmured softly, his thoughts whirling with wonder and fear.

She flicked him gently with her tail. "Don't stress out about it too much. We understand if you don't want to go. I hope you do, though."

Glancing up at the sun, she gave him a sad smile. “Well, I would love to stay longer, Jeb, but we promised my Mom that we would be home within an hour. See you tonight.”

“See you,” Jeb murmured softly. He hardly bothered to look up when the three of them walked away and left him alone with his thoughts and a terrifying decision.

“I can already tell this forest is going to be the death of me.” Dingo let out a low growl and tugged at a weed that had wound itself around his paw. Looking back, Saderia let out a giggle. Rolling his eyes, Dingo let out an exasperated sigh, as grumpy as ever.

Biting back a laugh, Dash clawed the vine away. Giving him a grateful glance, Dingo stepped forward and sighed when another weed grabbed his paw. “I give up.”

Shaking her head and smiling while Dingo tugged at the weed and kicked it away, Saderia turned around to lead the way back to her home. Weaving around the thick trees and pushing through clumps of undergrowth, she tried not to laugh at the low growls she could hear behind her every time a weed tripped Dingo up. Seeing the annoyed look on his face and the confusion in his light brown eyes when he looked around to try to figure out where they were, she could almost understand why he was looking forward to returning to the desert. It might be dangerous, but at least he knew his way around.

Leading the way past a pink-leafed tree and shoving aside leaves to clear a path for Dingo, she let her mind wander. Worry and anticipation pricked at her paws when she wondered what Jeb’s answer would be. A strong, warning instinct told her she *needed* him to come with them. She just hoped her instinct predicted the future.

Blinking the thoughts away, she leapt over a clump of undergrowth and broke out into the clearing around her den. Dingo let out a relieved sigh when he finally padded out of the forest. Stepping closer to the den, Saderia froze when she heard the noises from inside. Loud, angry shouts sounded from inside the den, growing louder and louder with every second.

Saderia glanced at Dash and Dingo, her eyes wide with worry. “Stay here,” she murmured, darting toward her den and leaving them standing there in surprise.

“Something has happened to them! They’re in trouble!” Saderia froze in the entrance to the den at the sound of Karenisha’s panicked voice and stared in shock. Cia and Karenisha stood in the center of the den, facing each other with blazing blue and amber eyes. Uncle Jash stood a few paces behind them, watching with stunned blue eyes.

Cia hissed. “I’m telling you, they’re fine, Karenisha! They’re just out exploring!”

“So was Makero!” The Queen lashed her tail in fury. “Saderia and Dash are hurt or dead! I just know it! What if there was a disaster? What if I’ve lost them too?”

“Mom, I’m right here!” Saderia exclaimed, taking a step forward and staring up at her mother with wide, shocked amber eyes.

Karenisha whipped around to stare at her, her eyes widening in disbelief. Relief crossed her face before she narrowed her eyes uncertainly. “Where’s Dash?”

“Right here.” Dash leapt into the entrance and stood close beside Saderia while Dingo padded up behind them to peer curiously inside. Looking up to meet his foster mother’s eyes, Dash frowned and nervously flicked his tail. “We’re all fine, Karenisha.”

The Queen narrowed her eyes and studied them silently before letting out a soft sigh. “I thought I had lost more family...”

Saderia frowned. “Why would you think that?”

Karenisha looked away and didn’t respond. Without saying another word, she whirled around and stormed off toward her room, her head drooping and her tail dragging across the ground. Cia and Uncle Jash exchanged worried looks before hurrying after Karenisha and disappearing behind the rocky wall of the Queen’s room.

Trying to suppress a wave of worry and uncertainty, Saderia trailed off toward her own room with Dash and Dingo close behind her. Imagining Karenisha’s gaunt, lifeless appearance, she suddenly wished she could hold off on leaving for fear that if she ran away now, her mother would feel even worse. Stepping into her room, she tried to push the thought away, knowing she had to save her father before she worried about her mother.

Shaking herself out of her haze, she narrowed her eyes in determination. “If we’re going to be leaving tonight, we need to pack food. I think I’ve still got some of the old packs we used to carry food when we

left our old forest. Dash, can you go get a bunch of food from the kitchen?” Dash nodded and stepped out of the room while Saderia padded around to the other side of her bed with Dingo following her curiously. Leaning down, Saderia peered into a tiny alcove at the bottom of her stone bed and pulled out a few of the old, worn packs she had carried with her across the desert.

“I can’t believe we’re only a few hours away from leaving,” Dash murmured when he padded back into the room. “Do you think that will be enough?”

Pulling the four packs of food onto the bed and glancing at the food he had brought in, she nodded. “That should be plenty.” She glanced down at the floor, then pushed the packs toward Dash and Dingo. “Do me a favor and pack the food in as tightly as you can. There’s one last thing I have to do.”

The two of them nodded and grabbed a pack. Giving them a lingering glance, Saderia leaned down and patted around in the alcove until her paw landed on an old book. Wincing, she pulled out her mother’s diary and laid it on the bed. Her heart ached with pain when she thought of the light-hearted passages her mother had written so many years ago and how much she had changed since Saderia had found her in the dungeon. Trying to push the thought away, she took a deep breath and tore out a fresh page. She hesitated for a long moment, searching for the right words, before beginning her letter of farewell.

**Dear Mom, Cia, and Uncle Jash,**

**This situation has gotten out of hand. I have decided to go out into the desert to look for my father to make sure he’s all right and bring him back home. This is no one’s fault and please don’t worry about me. I want you all to know that Dash and I are safe. Dingo knows the desert like he knows his own name and he has agreed to guide us through the desert to find my Dad. With him guiding us, we have no chance of getting lost and slim chances of getting hurt. I wouldn’t go if this wasn’t important to me. Dash and I love you all. Please do not worry about us.**

**Love, Saderia**



Looking up, she saw that all the packs had been stuffed full. Her heart ached with pain, but she ignored the sadness rising in her chest and placed the note gently on top of her bed. All their preparation was over. Now all that was left to do was leave.

Cold wind whispered through the dark, shadowed forest. Shivering and nearly shaking with terror, Jeb sat by the entrance to his Spring, staring out at the woods with uneasy blue and green eyes. Images of The Land Beyond the Forest whirled through his mind, sending a sharp jolt of terror racing down his spine. Gritting his teeth, he tried to push away the thoughts. Saderia, Dash, and even that new animal he had met would be there for him even in the darkest of times in The Land Beyond The Forest.

The thought of his friends made him relax in the darkness of the night and he forced himself to take a deep breath. He had spent hours agonizing over his decision, and after what seemed like ages, he had finally found an answer. Never before had he wanted an adventurous life, but now that it was looming on the horizon, he couldn't help but feel a tingle of excitement. More than anything, he wanted to be with his friends.

Closing his eyes, he shivered when he remembered how he had dreaded telling his parents about his decision. For hours, he had stood frozen in his cave den, staring at them while they talked over a few pieces of fruit. Only when they had started to leave to go to the surface world and stock up on more food did he finally force himself to speak up and tell them what he wanted to do. Everything his friends had told him spilled out of his mouth before he could stop to think about what he should tell them and what he shouldn't. Telku and Jati had stood frozen in shock, then gaped at him when he had finished explaining

“That’s outrageous!” Telku had exclaimed.

Jati had gaped at him in horror and curled her lip. “Are they mad?”

Jeb had sat in silence before he finally found the courage to blurt out, “I’m going.”

His parents had stared at him in shock for ages, making his fur prickle in unease.

Jati had finally narrowed her eyes and gaped at him in disbelief. “What?”

Jeb had stared up at them with wide, pleading blue and green eyes, his tail flicking desperately back and forth. "Listen, I just can't live down in this Spring forever. It's horrible down here. It's more dangerous down here than anywhere in the forest and maybe even anywhere in The Land Beyond the Forest. I don't want to stay trapped down here for the rest of my life for something Keruni did. Maybe...maybe if I get to know Saderia and Dash, they'll finally introduce me to the others. Maybe then they'll accept me into their own society. Besides, I like Saderia and Dash and I want to help them. They actually *want* me to come with them. I...I can't just keep hiding all my life. I'm actually part of something with Saderia and Dash and...maybe if I go out into The Land Beyond the Forest and face that fear, I won't be so afraid anymore."

"You're mad," Jati had proclaimed with sharp, narrowed eyes.

Instead of echoing Jati, Telku had simply stared at Jeb for what felt like a lifetime, studying him closely. After a long moment, he had taken a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Maybe you're right, Jeb." Both Jeb and his mother had looked up at him in shock, but Telku went on before they could speak. "It's good you want to get to know your friends. Perhaps...we will be able to move out of here. That's what you wanted, right, Jati?"

Jati had narrowed her eyes and glared at him in silence.

Telku had turned back to Jeb and let out a soft sigh. "If Jeb can face his fear, I think that's important. Jeb, if you really want to go, you should."

A cold wind suddenly rustled Jeb's fur, making his memories fade away. Blinking rapidly, he stared out at the dark forest and felt another shiver creep up his spine. With his parents' approval, he felt better about leaving, but the thought still made him tremble with fear. Gritting his teeth, he struggled to push away the fear, determined to stick to his decision. Within moments, the bushes on the side of the clearing started to rustle.

Saderia's tail flicked rapidly back and forth with nervousness as she pushed past a clump of bushes and padded into the clearing around Jeb's Spring with Dash and Dingo beside her and four packs of food slung over their shoulders. An instinct made her heart beat faster with the hope that Jeb would agree to come with them. Her mind whirled with the need to leave to search for her father and the longing to stay behind for her mother. Pushing the thoughts away, she forced herself to look up. There was no turning back now.

Dash managed a smile when he spotted Jeb. Padding forward beside Saderia, he stopped just a few inches away from him. "Hi, Jeb. You look kind of...shaky."

Jeb let out a long breath and tried to relax. "I'm fine."

Saderia managed a tiny smile, then took a deep breath and met Jeb's eyes. "I know this is short notice and probably difficult for you...but the journey I have planned is very, very important and we really need you on the trip. Will you come with us?"

Jeb took a shaky breath and looked at each of them. Kindness glimmered in the bright amber eyes of Saderia and Dash and even shone behind Dingo's guarded light brown gaze. His heart beat frantically, but he forced himself to stand up straighter. Shaking and feeling almost faint, he gave a determined nod. "Yes, I'll come with you."

Saderia's eyes lit up with excitement. "Great! Thank you so much! I promise that everything will be fine. We've done this many times before and it's not nearly as hard as it seems. We've even got a whole pack of food for you." Glancing over at Dingo, she smiled when he grabbed a pack of food and gently handed it over to Jeb.

Jeb shakily took the pack. "All right," he murmured. "Let's go."

Moonlight shone down on the forest, dappling the leaves with a silver glow. Saderia pushed her way past the few remaining trees to stand on the edge of the forest and the desert. Her eyes grew wide with wonder as she gazed out at the endless silver sand dunes unbroken by a single tree or blade of grass. Her friends crept up behind her and stared out at the desert in silence. Jeb gaped at the sandy land in front of him in shock. Dash narrowed his eyes and faced the desert with a look of determination. Dingo's expression was an unreadable mixture of longing and hatred for the desert. All of the members of the prophecy stood on the edge of the forest except for one.

Glancing to the side, Saderia's eyes widened and she almost jumped when she saw a faint, transparent dingo standing beside her and gazing out at the desert with clouded light brown eyes. "Claw?" she whispered. "You're here, too?"

The spirit slowly turned to look at her, her light brown eyes gleaming in the dim light. "Of course," she whispered. "You didn't think I

would miss this, did you?”

Saderia blinked and stared back at her in amazement, unable to speak. She jumped when Dash gave her a gentle tap on her shoulder. Whirling around to face him, she paused when she saw the confused look on his face.

Dash frowned and tipped his head to the side. “Are you talking to air?”

Saderia felt her face grow hot with embarrassment. “Um...not exactly.”

He narrowed his eyes and squinted. “I kind of...see something there. Is...”

She cast a glance over his shoulder and felt a small hint of relief when she realized Dingo hadn’t overheard them. His light brown gaze was locked on the desert in front of them. Leaning closer to Dash, she dropped her voice to a whisper. “Claw’s standing right next to me. No one else can see her. Don’t tell Dingo.”

Dash’s eyes widened in surprise, but he simply nodded and cast a sympathetic glance toward Dingo. Narrowing his eyes, he studied the spot next to Saderia to try to see the spirit, but Claw had already turned and padded away from them, her wispy tail waving lightly through the air. Padding toward Dingo, the ghost pressed up against her brother and smiled when he jumped and looked around in confusion as if he had felt something but couldn’t see what had touched him. Looking up, Claw met Saderia’s eyes and gave her a warm nod. “I’ll be with you every step you take. Good luck on your journey.”

Saderia smiled, but when she blinked her eyes and opened them again, Claw had already vaporized into the air. Shaking off a shiver of wonder and amazement, she turned back around to face the dark desert and took a deep breath. “Is everybody ready?”

Turning to face the desert, Dash gave her a nod. Behind them, Dingo blinked and let out a tiny growl of agreement. Beside him, Jeb nodded shakily and gave a tiny squeak, keeping his blue and green eyes locked on the desert sand.

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “Then let’s go.”

Without another word, she flicked her tail and took her first step into the desert with Dash, Dingo, and Jeb following close behind her. She

narrowed her eyes when her paws brushed against the cool sand and looked up at the stars glimmering in the dark night sky. “Don’t worry, Dad. I’m coming to find you.”

# Chapter Twenty-Six

## Openness

Hours passed by under the silvery glow of the moon. Stars twinkled in the darkness, forming a map across the sky. Blinking to keep her eyes open, Saderia stumbled across the chilly desert sand and struggled to see through the darkness, hoping that after a few days of walking she would finally see her old forest and start from there to find Makero. Walking in front of her, Dingo kept his gaze trained on the land, his eyes gleaming with determination. Dash padded tiredly beside her, his eyelids drooping. Jeb trailed a few paces behind them, looking around with wide blue and green eyes.

Jeb gazed at the dark desert with stunned eyes. Terror and awe made his heart beat rapidly at the sight of the strange place just beyond his forest. He had caught glimpses of the light brown sand through the trees before, but he had never imagined actually seeing or being in the vast, barren land. Huge sand dunes rose up around him, unbroken by trees, while the black, starry sky stretched out above him like a huge, dark blanket. A shiver of fear crept down his spine when he realized there were no places to hide. Trying to relax, he looked around and realized there didn't seem to be anything to hide from. Letting out a soft sigh, he turned and tried to calm down, but he couldn't push away a tremble of nervousness when he noticed the dark, uneasy glances Dingo kept casting over both shoulders.

Biting back a whimper of unease, Jeb glanced rapidly around at his friends. They had already promised him they would protect him, but it was hard to picture Saderia and Dash fighting anybody after they had been so kind to him. Remembering how they had scared Secka away from him and looking over their sharp claws, he tried to tell himself they were capable of it, but the image didn't fit right. Looking ahead at Dingo, he felt a shiver of fear when he noticed the long, deep scars crossing his face and lining his back, legs, and sides. Both of his ears were torn or shredded. Of all of them,

the only one Jeb could vividly imagine fighting was him, the strange new animal he had only just met.

Trying to shake off his worries, he let out a soft breath and pushed away a glimmer of shock that he had actually left his forest. After several hours had passed, his paws had begun to ache with pain and exhaustion and his eyelids had begun to droop, but he tried not to show his tiredness. Saderia had invited him on the journey despite his fearfulness and he had to keep up with them, not slow them down.

Gazing around at the desert, Jeb pushed away the boredom of the trip by letting his eyes trail over the unfamiliar sand dunes. A tingle of excitement burned in his chest, but he still felt a hint of fear knowing he would never be able to find his way home without Dingo's help. So far, the strange canine hadn't said a word the entire journey except to let out a low growl every now and then. Looking up at his long, shaggy brown fur and narrowed light brown eyes, Jeb couldn't help but wonder what his story was, but he tried to hide his curiosity. Hopefully, he would know more about all of them later on. For now, he trusted them and he actually started to look forward to the rest of the journey.

Stumbling forward and staggering to a stop, Dash let out a long sigh and stared tiredly down at his paws. "I already feel like my paws are about to fall off."

Saderia let out a small breath of relief and stopped, her head drooping. "Good. I was hoping I wouldn't have to be the one to say it." Glancing up, she saw Dingo pause and turn to look at them. "Dingo, are you tired? Do you want to stop and call it a night?"

Dingo grinned. "What are you talking about? I could keep going for another few hours." He snickered when all three of them let out a groan and rolled his eyes. "I'm just kidding. If you want to stop, that's fine. But we'll be sleeping under the stars tonight."

Saderia shrugged and glanced up at the sky. "That's all right. I've slept out under the stars plenty of times before." Letting out a soft sigh, she gently lowered herself down on the ground and managed a slight smile, ignoring the chilly touch of the soft, gritty sand and the cold air around her. Several miles stretched out between her and Jeb's forest. She let out a breath of relief, knowing they had made good time.

Dash let out a soft sigh and flopped down beside her, pressing close against her to keep her warm. Looking around, he frowned uneasily. "Should someone keep watch?"

Jeb's ears pricked up as he settled onto the ground. "Would we... need to?"

Saderia frowned. "I don't know. Dingo, what do you think?"

Lying down, Dingo looked up at the stars and frowned. "Dingoes don't usually come here. And if they do, they'll be hunting. We'll hear them howl first."

Jeb looked around nervously, his blue and green eyes wide with fear. "Dingoes? You mean those mean animals you told me about in your story?"

Dingo flicked his tail. "Like I said, I don't really think we have to worry too much tonight. But if it will make you all feel better, I would be happy to stay up."

Narrowing his eyes, Dash jumped to his paws and sternly met his gaze. "If anyone's staying up, it's me. You've been doing everything for us, Dingo."

Dingo snorted. "Navigating the desert isn't hard work for me. And you're already asleep on your paws, Dash. Don't be ridiculous."

Frowning, Dash sat back with a mutinous glare while Saderia tried to hide a grin. Was that competition she detected?

Jeb flicked his tail uneasily and tried to ignore the fear creeping up his spine. "If you really think it's safe, then...I guess no one needs to keep watch."

"In that case, goodnight," Dingo sighed, letting his head flop down onto his paws.

Saderia smiled and rested her head on the gritty ground. When she saw Jeb shiver nervously, she gently patted the spot beside her. Jeb gave her a grateful smile and crept over to lay by her. On her other side, Dash let out a soft sigh and laid his head down on his paws, casting Dingo one last playful glare before closing his eyes. When Saderia closed her eyes, she could somehow feel Claw's warm presence close beside her. Feeling a glow of happiness at being with all of her friends, she relaxed and drifted off into unconsciousness, knowing that all the members of the prophecy were finally together.



“We couldn’t say no. It’s scary, but if Jeb wanted to go with his friends, we had to let him.” Telku let out a soft sigh and gazed out at the vast, barren land in front of him. Sitting on the very outskirts of the forest, he gazed around at the desert with worried green eyes. “Besides,” he murmured, “Jeb said those creatures had a friend who knew how to get around this vast...place. I don’t think they would put him in danger.”

Jati narrowed her eyes. “I still think you’re both insane.” She hesitated, then looked down at her paws with uncertain blue and gray eyes. “You’re probably right, though. Maybe the world out there isn’t so bad. I just hope he comes back soon.”

Telku lowered his head and heaved a heavy sigh. “Me too.”

Sunlight shimmered into the den, casting a yellow glow over Karenisha’s dirty orange fur. Blinking open her eyes, she raised her head and looked around at her small, rocky room, then glanced out into the abandoned main room of the house and frowned. A dark, uneasy feeling rose in her chest, warning her that something horrible had happened.

Narrowing her eyes, she tiredly pulled herself to her paws and tried to ignore the pain in her weak muscles. Creeping forward, she peered out into the main room. Her dull gaze swung around to the room opposite hers and the dark, eerie warning burned in her chest when she saw Cia and Jash standing inside Saderia’s room, hovering over her bed. Her heart skipped a beat when she caught a glimpse of the fear and dismay glimmering in their blue eyes. Had something happened to Saderia and Dash?

Stepping forward with paws that felt like stone and letting her tail drag across the ground, she padded over to the room and looked dully inside. Saderia and Dash were nowhere to be seen. “What’s going on?” she murmured.

Cia jumped and whirled around, her eyes widening in alarm. Out of the corner of her eye, Karenisha saw Jash hide a piece of paper from sight. Cia flicked him sharply with her tail. “Don’t tell Karenisha,” she hissed in a voice she could just barely hear.

The Queen narrowed her eyes. “Don’t tell Karenisha what?”

Cia and Jash exchanged fearful glances, but before they could reply, Karenisha snatched the paper out of Jash’s paws. Dodging away from Cia when she tried to grab it, she held the paper up to her face and scanned her

daughter's neat handwriting. "Dear Mom, Cia, and Uncle Jash...This situation has gotten out of hand...I have decided to go out into the desert..." She trailed off and read the rest of the letter in silence. Cia and Jash stood frozen in place, watching her with wide, uneasy blue eyes. Slowly the paper started to tremble in Karenisha's shaky paws until it finally fluttered to the ground.

"Karenisha," Cia whispered. "They *do* have Dingo with them, so..."

Karenisha just shook her head, her eyes wide and lifeless, staring out at something they couldn't see. Without a word, she walked away from the crumpled letter and turned her back on them, leaving the room in silence.

"Hey, wake up! It's morning."

Saderia blinked open her eyes and squinted when a ray of blinding sunlight flashed in the sky. Lifting her head, she pulled herself onto her paws and looked at the barren land around her. The sand underneath her paws felt warm with the heat of the sun, but the light shining around her made her feel a tiny bit of hope and happiness. Looking around, she saw Dash standing beside her and giving her a sheepish smile.

"Sorry," he said, giving her a shrug. "I didn't know if you would want to start moving early or sleep in some more."

"Start moving early," she murmured, blinking the sleepiness out of her eyes and turning to look around. "Is everyone else awake?"

"I am." She turned to see Dingo sitting just a few paces away, staring out at the desert with narrowed light brown eyes and flicking his tail lightly back and forth.

Dash rolled his eyes. "He's the one who woke me up."

Saderia grinned and looked down to see Jeb blink open his eyes beside her. Alarm colored his blue and green irises and he leapt to his paws in panic, looking around wildly. Seeming disoriented, as if he couldn't remember where he was, he turned to look up at her and paused when a light of understanding lit up his gaze. Relaxing ever so slightly, he slowly sat back and let out a shaky breath. "S-sorry. Did I, um, sleep in too long?"

Saderia shook her head. "No, I just woke up. I do want to get going now, though."

Blinking rapidly, Jeb gave a shaky nod. "A-all right. I'm ready."

Saderia smiled, then turned to her canine friend. "Dingo, I hope you know where we are and where we're going."

Dingo snorted. "Of course I do. Now if everyone's ready, I'll lead."

After stretching her tired legs, Saderia nodded at him to start moving and fell into step behind him. Dash and Jeb quickly followed and began walking toward the old forest.

Burning sunlight beat down on them, scorching their fur and wearing them down with every step. Heavy pants shuddered out of Saderia's chest and her throat felt raw and dry from lack of water. Her paw pads seared with pain against the gritty, burning hot sand. Hours passed by. Slouching with exhaustion and heat, Saderia let her eyelids droop and lost track of how much time had passed by. No matter how long she walked, the only thing she could see was an endless stretch of sand dunes and light blue sky. It felt as if she was walking in place and never getting any farther even though she knew how the desert looked and how easy it was to get lost in such a barren land.

Dash let out a low groan. "I hate this," he muttered, trying to swipe away the sweaty strands of his mane plastered to his face and letting his tail drag against the ground.

She tried to give him a playful smile. "Grumpy much?"

"I have a mane," Dash muttered, giving her a dark glance out of the corner of his eyes. "It's not exactly helpful in this heat."

She winced sympathetically. "I guess you're right."

Looking up at them, Jeb tried not to whimper or collapse under the draining heat of the sun. His tail dragged against the ground and his legs ached with exhaustion. The yellow fur on his back felt sticky and clung uncomfortably to his skin. His whole body seemed to droop, making him seem even smaller than usual. His raw, scratchy throat burned with pain and longed for water. Looking up, he felt a jolt of dismay and disbelief when he saw Dingo walking ahead of him, Saderia, and Dash. His light brown eyes gleamed and he stood up straight with his tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth, panting but otherwise seeming almost completely unbothered by the heat.

"Aren't you hot?" he choked out.

Dash looked up and scowled. "No, he doesn't get hot. Stupid dingo."

Dingo chuckled and glanced back. "Is that jealousy I detect, Dash?"

Dash narrowed his eyes. "I feel like I'm being fried in an oven, so yes, it is a bit maddening that you aren't even the least bit uncomfortable."

"You'll get over it." Dingo grinned and gave a teasing flick of his tail. "Should I keep going or are you all about to collapse on me?"

Dash gritted his teeth and glared down at his paws. "I can keep going."

Saderia nodded determinedly while Jeb let out a sigh and forced himself to agree. Walking after them and struggling to keep from tripping, Saderia longed for fur as thin as Dingo's so she wouldn't feel so hot. The heat beat down on her, seeming to push her farther and farther onto the ground with every step. After hours of walking, her sight blurred and she stumbled forward without seeing where she was going. Her cracked paw pads felt sticky with a tiny trace of blood and stung with pain at the gritty sand. Heaving a long sigh, she finally stopped, knowing she had to be the one to call for a break.

"Can we *please* rest for a while? I'm so hungry and tired, I'm not sure whether I want to eat every bit of food we have or collapse."

Dash heaved a long sigh and crumpled to the ground. "Thank you!"

Feeling weak with relief, Jeb slumped onto the ground and tried not to wince in pain. Glancing back in surprise and seeming unbothered by the heat, the exhaustion, or the hunger, Dingo just shrugged and sat down in front of them.

Saderia swung her pack of food off her shoulder and pulled out a piece of fruit. Trying to ignore her exhaustion, she let out a sigh. "We should talk about where exactly we're going. Dingo, this is your desert, so you should have some idea where to go."

Dingo frowned and rolled his piece of food absentmindedly back and forth across the ground. "Do you know how long ago your father set out from your old forest?"

She shrugged. "About four days ago. But Cl...er..." She faltered and looked down in unease, clamping her mouth shut over Claw's name. "I, uh, had a Dream that said he got into some sort of trouble a day after he set out, so he might not have gotten very far."

Dingo frowned in confusion, wondering what she had been about to say. After a long moment of studying her, he simply nodded and glanced

thoughtfully at his paws. "Then he'll be close to your old forest. We can get there in probably less than a week and then we'll start our search around that area and gradually move back toward Jeb's forest."

Saderia nodded slowly. "In that case, we'll ration the food for two pieces a day, which will last us at least a week. If we run out, there's bound to be food back at my old forest that we can replenish our packs with."

"Works for me," Dash murmured, taking a bite out of his food.

Dingo just shrugged and rolled his food around, not bothering to take a bite.

Finishing off his piece of fruit, Dash glanced back at Jeb and flicked him with his tail. "How are you doing so far? Are you holding up okay?"

Jeb blinked and gave him a weak nod, trying to ignore the boiling heat of the sun. "Yes, I'm fine. It's...interesting being out here."

"Well, jeez," Dash muttered, rolling his eyes. "Am I the only one complaining?"

Saderia giggled. "You're saying what we're thinking."

Dingo grinned, then turned to Jeb curiously. "So what's your story, Jeb?"

Jeb hesitated, then shrugged and started telling him about his life back in his forest with Keruni and his parents and how the fire had landed him in the Spring. He described all of his run-ins with Keruni and Zerone and how he had slowly begun to wonder if Zerone hadn't been the one to start the fire and frame him. After a brief pause, he told him about Secka and how he had pretended to hurt the creatures in order to torment Zerone and how he had eventually turned against Jeb. Finally, he explained how Saderia and Dash had found him and how he had learned the truth from Keruni.

Dingo nodded when he trailed off. "That's an impressive story. At least it worked out in the end." He glanced at Saderia and Dash. "I take it you've heard their stories."

He nodded. "Yeah, they told me about Saderia's powers and their old forest."

"And?"

He blinked and shrugged. "That's all they told me so far."

Dingo laid down and studied him curiously. "What about Dash's story?"

He frowned in confusion. "Dash's story?"

"Yeah." Dingo flicked his tail. "He's not really Saderia's brother, you know."

Jeb blinked in surprise. "He's not?"

Dingo shook his head and looked at the lion. "Dash? Do you want to tell him?"

Dash took a deep breath before explaining who his father was and how his mother had abandoned him before he really knew her. Jumping into the story, Saderia told him about her past, as well, and described how she had at first lived with her aunt and uncle after her parents were supposedly killed in the fire. Afterwards, she told him about how she had started investigating the fire with Dastarius's help and started suspecting her aunt and uncle before she realized the dark lion had been setting them up. She described how she and her family had been trapped down in Dastarius's dungeon for days before Dash had saved them and how she and her family had run to stop him from getting the powerful scroll hidden in the tomb of her oldest ancestor. Once she had finished her story, Dash explained how he had eventually met Saderia and become friends with her despite Lolista trying to keep them apart and how they had eventually welcomed him into their home.

Jeb stared at them in amazement when they had finally finished. "You have a lot of history," he murmured. "That's really amazing. I...I did kind of wonder why you called your mother by her real name, though," he added, glancing at Dash.

"Yeah, only dingoes seem to do that," Dingo murmured.

Jeb blinked at him in surprise. "You don't call your Mom...Mom?"

He shrugged. "Nope. Parents don't really have much to do with their children in the pack. My mother never had anything to do with me and my father hated my guts."

"The pack's kind of cruel," Saderia murmured, casting a guilty glance at Dingo. "It's everybody for themselves in the pack."

Jeb shivered nervously. "And they live here?"

"Yeah, a few miles that way," Dingo replied, gesturing carelessly behind him with his tail. "Let's hope they stay there."

They all nodded darkly, casting uneasy glances in the direction Dingo had pointed out. Trying to ignore a shiver of fear, Jeb looked up at

Dingo in wonder. "So...you don't really have what you would call a family?"

Dingo froze in shock, while Saderia stiffened and turned around to stare at him. Dash looked up from his food and glanced uncomfortably back and forth between Jeb and Dingo. Under Dingo's stunned gaze, Jeb stared down at his paws and tried to suppress a fearful whimper, realizing he had stumbled onto rocky territory.

"I have a family," Dingo growled. Glancing down at his paws, he curled his lip and narrowed his eyes. "Just not a very good one." He looked up at Jeb and let out a long, heavy sigh, seeming to try to relax. "Three brothers, one sister."

Jeb's eyes widened in shock. "Oh. That's...that's a lot of family."

Dingo rolled his eyes. "Too much family. I would prefer if I only had one sister."

Jeb blinked in surprise. "Really? Why?" The words slipped out before he could think and his eyes widened when he realized that was probably why Dingo seemed bitter.

Dingo narrowed his eyes and let out a low growl. "It's a long and difficult story."

Jeb just nodded and kept his paw covering his mouth, burning with curiosity about his four siblings but afraid of how he might react if he asked.

Dingo cut his eyes to the side and heaved a sigh. "I know you want to ask about them. All you need to know right now is that I only have two brothers left. One brother and my sister are dead. So is my father, who used to lead the pack."

Jeb's eyes widened in horror and a tiny gasp escaped his throat. His heart twisted with shock and he stared at Dingo in disbelief, unable to imagine how horrible it would feel to lose three family members. The thought of never being able to see them again made his heart ache with grief. "That's...horrible!" he choked out. "I...I'm so sorry!"

Dingo heaved a long sigh and pulled himself to his paws, keeping his eyes trained on the ground and rolling his piece of food back toward Saderia. "Why don't you all stay here for a moment? I'm going to leave for a minute to make sure no dingoes are coming this way. Relax," he added,

seeing their alarmed expression. "I'll be back in two seconds and you won't get lost so long as you don't move from this spot."

Saderia let out a sigh and nodded. He held her gaze for a long moment before turning and stalking away, disappearing behind a sand dune with one final lash of his tail. Taking a deep breath, Saderia placed his abandoned piece of food back in her bag. There were no dingoes hanging around. She knew Dingo just needed a moment to breathe.

Jeb looked at the spot where he had disappeared and winced. "I'm sorry," he stammered, facing Saderia with wide, fearful eyes.. "I made him leave, didn't I?"

Dash sighed and gave him a reassuring flick of his tail. "Don't worry about Dingo. He always has to leave any time he tells this story. It's not exactly a pretty story."

"Dingo's past is very dark," Saderia murmured. "He's been through a lot of difficult things. He'll tell you eventually, so don't press. It just upsets him whenever he has to think about his past. You'll understand why when he does tell you his story."

Jeb glanced uncertainly down at his paws. "Okay, if you say so. I really am sorry." He paused, then looked up with wide, horrified blue and green eyes. "That's so sad, though! He's already lost *three* family members? When did they die?"

Dash glanced over at Saderia for a long moment before turning back to Jeb, deciding the dates wouldn't do much harm. "His sister died a year ago, his brother died six months ago, and his father died two days after his brother."

Jeb stared at him in dismay. How could anybody go on after losing three family members in such a short amount of time? "That's...that's horrible! He must be so sad!"

Saderia let out a soft sigh. "He's not. Don't worry about him." She glanced at the spot where Dingo had disappeared, then turned back to Jeb with sad amber eyes. "Listen, don't judge Dingo too harshly, but he really doesn't care about the death of his father and the only reason he cares about his brother's death is not related to actual sadness that he's gone. I know you don't understand and you might think that's horrible since all your family members have been kind, but he's got a lot of good reasons not to miss them. He does miss his sister, though, and he loved her more than



anything.” Trailing off, she wondered when she would tell Dingo about seeing Claw and winced when she tried to picture it.

Jeb blinked in shock and felt a shiver of horror. How could Dingo lose three family members...and not even care about two of them? He had said something about his father hating him, but how could his father and his brother hate a member of their own family? What could his own family have done to make him not miss them? Feeling a twinge of unease, he suddenly felt less comfortable around Dingo, but he tried to push away his shock and trust Saderia. “What about his mother and his other brothers?”

Saderia glanced down at her paws. “He’s never had much to do with them. He’s wanted to, but they don’t like him no matter what he does. His mother is pretty much a stranger to him from what I’ve heard. I think he used to be a bit close to his other brothers, Rip and Tear, but they haven’t seen each other in a long time.”

“The pack thinks he’s dead,” Dash spoke up. “It’s a long story, but right now, every dingo in the desert except for one believes he’s dead, so we’re trying to keep a low profile. Believe me, if they knew he was alive, it would be bad. The pack hates Dingo.”

Saderia raised an eyebrow. “To put it mildly.”

Jeb blinked in surprise, wondering why they would hate Dingo so much even if he did seem a bit unnerving. His thoughts faded away at the sound of a quiet howl and he looked up to see Dingo leap over the top of a sand dune and bound toward them.

“All clear!” Dingo called. “Are you all done resting and ready to go?”

Saderia jumped to her paws and grinned. “You bet!” she exclaimed.

Dingo grinned and flicked his tail toward Jeb. “How about you?”

Jeb looked down guiltily and slowly pushed himself to his paws. “I’m ready.”

Dingo’s eyes flashed. “Then what are we waiting for? Let’s get moving.”

Moonlight shimmered into the den, lighting up the walls with a silver glow. Karenisha laid unmoving on top of her stony bed, staring lifelessly at the wall. The words in Saderia’s farewell note raced through her mind over and over again, making her wince with grief. First Makero had

left and traveled to his death and now Saderia and Dash had followed in his paw steps. Was her whole family destined to be taken away from her?

Cia and Jash had told her to wait for them to come home and assured her they would, but no matter how much she wanted to believe them, she couldn't. Saderia and Dash's sole purpose for setting out had been to find Makero. Wherever they found Makero, they would find hunters. They had started a journey to lead themselves straight to their deaths.

Karenisha squeezed her eyes shut and buried her face in her paws. After months and months of running into danger, her daughter was going to die not because of some cruel twist of fate but because she had gone looking for trouble. Instead of having some terrible tragedy fall into their lives, Saderia was going to die of her own decision. She had led herself straight into her doom, knowing the danger that was waiting for her.

Taking a deep breath, Karenisha bit back a sob and slowly opened her eyes to gaze out at the room. What if it was her fault? What if she had driven Saderia away?

Saderia stumbled to a stop and collapsed on the ground, panting and trying to ignore the searing pain in her muscles. The burning sun scorched her fur and the heated sand burned her belly when she laid down, but she tried not to think about the pain. Her throat felt raw and scratchy and she longed for water, but she knew finding it was impossible. She looked up to see her friends stumble onto the ground for their first break since they had started walking that morning. Staggering forward, Dash flopped down on his belly with a long sigh. Jeb collapsed on the ground with a tired whimper. Turning around, Dingo calmly sat back to watch the three of them.

Taking a deep breath, Saderia pushed herself up and unzipped her pack to hand out a few pieces of food. After taking a bite of her food, she murmured, "It's been three days since we set out. How far do you think we've gone, Dingo?"

Dingo glanced up at the sky and narrowed his eyes. "We've gone pretty far. I would say we have about four or five more days until we reach your forest. But we're also getting closer to the dingo camps. Starting tomorrow, we'll have to be more careful."

Saderia nodded, pushing away a twinge of fear. “All right. We can do that.”

Dash looked up. “There *are* four of us. We’ll probably be okay, right?”

Jeb looked up with wide, fearful eyes. They were counting *him* in this? He felt a rush of guilt at the selfish thought, but he couldn’t push away the cold fear building in his chest. He wanted to help them and knew he couldn’t just rely on them to protect him, but the thought of trying to fight alongside them was horrifying. “What...what are the dingoes like?” he stammered. “I mean, what would they do to us?”

Saderia let out a soft sigh. “It might scare you.”

He tried to hide the fear shining in his eyes. “That’s okay.”

Dingo sighed. “Well, here’s the short version: they think of you as food.”

Every hair on Jeb’s back stood on end and his eyes grew wide with terror. Memories of the visions he had had of slashing claws and pointed teeth flashed through his mind, reminding him of the fear he had felt when Saderia’s kind had first moved into the forest. Could other animals really resemble the things he had feared the most?

“Dingoes think they’re superior to everyone else,” Dingo continued in a low growl, oblivious to his terror. “They love to cause others pain. They would have no problem tearing apart Saderia and Dash if they got the chance. Tigers and lions and animals like that are just like prey to them—although they discovered they’re a bit bigger and harder to take down than they first assumed. As for you, Jeb, you’re definitely easier prey since you’re small, but I’m not sure how the dingoes would react to you since you look so strange and since you come from the weird forest.”

Jeb’s eyes grew wide with horror and a cold shiver raced down his spine, but to his surprise, Dash just rolled his eyes.

“Jeez, Dingo, you don’t have to be so harsh.”

Dingo narrowed his eyes. “What exactly is the point of sugarcoating everything? Would you rather I just say ‘Oh, they’re mean’ and wait for him to find out exactly what they’ll do to him the hard way?”

Dash shook his head with an exasperated sigh. “That’s not what I meant. You could have put it nicer. Somehow I don’t think it helped telling him he’s easier prey.”

Dingo rolled his eyes. "I can't help that it's the truth. But fine, I suppose I can be a bit harsh sometimes."

Saderia sighed. "The truth is the truth no matter how you put it. Jeb, don't worry about it. Dash and I made it through the desert and we'll help each other. I promise."

"She's right," Dingo said with a shrug, finishing off his food. "Dingos might be cruel, but it's easy enough to outwit them and outrun them. I'm sure we'll be fine. I'm the one who needs to worry." He gestured toward the open land. "Ready to go?"

Nodding, Saderia pushed herself to her paws and signaled for the others to follow. After taking a deep breath, Dash reluctantly padded after her while Jeb trotted uncertainly behind them. Turning around, Dingo led the way and began their journey once again.

The sun shone down on them hour after hour, wearing them into the ground and setting their fur ablaze with heat. With every mile that passed, Saderia's body felt weaker and weaker. Her stomach began to growl with hunger, but she tried to ignore the pain in her belly. She blinked several times to keep her eyesight from blurring with tiredness and struggled to keep going. Whenever she thought of her old forest waiting somewhere on the horizon, she felt a flash of determination and forced herself to keep moving. Heat rose off the surrounding sand dunes in waves. The blinding sun moved across the sky, drifting closer and closer to the horizon until it finally disappeared behind the sand dunes, plunging the desert into darkness. Stars began to twinkle in the darkening night sky when Saderia finally padded to a stop and called for a break to rest and go to sleep.

Dash let out a sigh of relief and carefully laid down beside Saderia, giving her a reassuring smile. Jeb crept closer to them and cautiously laid down beside them, while Dingo muttered goodnight and slumped down a few paces away from them.

Jeb glanced at Dingo's shaggy form and frowned uncertainly while Saderia and Dash tried to find a comfortable spot to sleep. He glanced at Saderia when she had finally rested her head on her paws and lowered his voice. "He's kind of grumpy, isn't he?"

She followed his gaze and smiled. "He always has been. You get used to it."

Jeb let out a sigh and stared down at his paws. "I don't think he likes me."

Dash flicked his tail and gave Jeb a reassuring smile. "Dingo never seems to like anybody at first. But trust me, he'll stick up for you no matter what."

Jeb frowned. "Why doesn't he like anybody?"

Saderia let out a sigh, her eyes clouding. "I think he doesn't *want* to like anybody. Dingo's afraid of having friends. He's lost almost every friend he ever had."

Jeb's eyes widened. "That's so sad. I wish I knew what happened to him."

"You will. Just give him time to come around." Seeing Jeb's uneasy look, she flicked him gently with her tail and smiled. "Don't worry about him."

Jeb glanced nervously down at his paws. "Will he really stick up for me? I mean, against those creepy other dingoes you told me about?"

Dash nodded solemnly. "He almost gave his life for us. And he would do it again for anybody, including you."

Jeb blinked in surprise. "Does he want to die?"

Saderia let out a sigh. "Sometimes it seems that way, but I know he'll be fine."

Jeb frowned and cast one last glance at Dingo before letting out a sigh and curling up next to Saderia, trying to ignore the guilt and uncertainty rising in his chest.

After a few minutes, the three of them had closed their eyes and fallen into a deep sleep. When Dingo heard the soft sound of their breathing and realized they had fallen asleep, he slowly raised his head and looked back at them, his light brown eyes dull and sad. Letting out a long sigh, he let his head drop back down onto his paws and squeezed his eyes shut, wishing he had someone to sleep next to like he had when Claw was alive. Trying to relax, he suddenly felt a strange, warm presence appear beside him. A second later, he drifted off into a peaceful sleep with a soothed smile spread across his face.

"Karenisha?"

The Queen barely moved at the sound of her sister's quiet, worried voice. Laying on her side on the rocky bed, she barely noticed the darkness or the faint glow of the moon. Her back was turned to her sister and brother-in-law whose eyes bored into her fur from where they stood near the entrance to her room. Her thoughts whirled with pain and grief. Saderia, Dash, and Makero had all left to go to their deaths. It was only a matter of time before Cia and Jash followed their path of destruction. What was left anymore?

"Karenisha?" Cia repeated, her voice soft and uneasy.

"They're dead," she murmured, her eyes clouding with sadness.

Cia shifted anxiously back and forth. "Karenisha, you should eat something."

She shook her head lifelessly. "They're dead."

Jash's eyes bored into her. "Karenisha, you haven't been out of bed in a while."

Karenisha just let out a sigh and didn't respond.

Behind her, Cia let out a long sigh and retreated out of the room with Jash close beside her. Her blue eyes gleamed with worry as she turned to face him. "That's all she says anymore. This is really bad." Her tail flicked fearfully back and forth. "Maybe Saderia and Dash really are in trouble."

Scorching sunlight glimmered brightly in the light blue sky, casting a blinding, burning glow on the desert sand. Blinking open his eyes and letting out a long yawn, Dingo looked around, then froze in surprise. Lying close beside him and still sleeping were Saderia, Dash, and Jeb. Blinking in shock, he felt a tingle of warmth, but he forced the small glimmer of emotion away. After a long hesitation, he slowly lowered his head back down onto his paws and let out a soft sigh. Normally he was eager to get going to take his mind off all the memories that haunted him, but he doubted it would hurt if he laid down to wait for his friends to wake up just once. The burning hot sun scorched his bristly fur, but he didn't mind the extra warmth of having them nearby. It was nice to have someone there for him again. In the six months that had passed without him seeing Saderia, he had remembered how horrible it felt to be alone.

He looked up when he heard a soft yawn and raised his head to see Saderia blink open her eyes. She lifted her head and smiled. "Good morning, Dingo."

He blinked rapidly and tried to smile. "Good morning."

She flicked him gently with her tail. "Sorry if we're too close. It just got a bit cold last night and we wanted to make sure you were comfortable."

He let out a soft sigh and stared down at his paws. "It's fine."

Saderia nodded and gazed at the sand for what seemed like hours. After a long moment, she finally rested her paw gently over his. "Dingo, I need to tell you something."

He frowned and glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Like what?"

She hesitated and looked uncertainly down at her paws. "It's... difficult to explain and I don't want to hurt you...but I think you should know."

He narrowed his eyes in misunderstanding. "Know what?"

Saderia glanced around at her sleeping companions, then carefully rose to her paws and padded away from them, flicking her tail for Dingo to follow. Tipping his head to the side in confusion, Dingo hesitated before uncertainly pushing himself to his paws and slinking away from the others to stand beside her a few feet away from them.

"What's going on?" he whispered when they stopped and stood huddled together.

She took a deep breath and met his gaze. "It's about your sister."

He froze and his eyes widened in surprise. "What? What about her?"

She hesitated for a long moment before finally letting out a shaky sigh. "Well, I know you still miss her. But I think you've finally recovered from what happened to her after a year has passed, so I think enough time has gone by for me to be able to tell you."

Dingo's fur bristled in shock and he narrowed his eyes in anger, opening his mouth to spit out an insult or a rebuke. After a long moment, he finally clamped his mouth shut and sat back with a long sigh, making his fur lie flat though his eyes were still dark and uncomfortable. "I suppose I have. But don't you *ever* say I don't miss her..."

“I never said that,” she murmured, her eyes clouding. “And I never would. I know Claw meant the world to you. That’s why I have to tell you this.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Tell me what?”

She took a deep breath and slowly let it out. “Well...you know how I told you about the prophecy and how I can see things in my Dreams, like the future.”

He nodded slowly, his light brown eyes narrowed in confusion. “Uh huh. And?”

“And...as it turns out I can see other things in my Dreams. Now I know this might upset you, but...I’ve realized I can see ghosts in my Dreams. I...I’ve seen Claw’s ghost.”

Dingo’s eyes widened in shock. A deafening silence spread out between them, making the air around them feel thick and tense. Trying not to show the unease in her amber eyes, she forced herself to look up and meet his stunned light brown gaze.

Dingo stared at her in shock and disbelief. “What kind of sick joke is this, Saderia?”

Her fur bristled and she narrowed her eyes, her heart aching with pain. “It’s not a joke. I would never say something like that as a joke. I’m telling you the truth.”

He scoffed and lashed his tail. “You expect me to believe something like that?”

“All I expect is for you to trust me. You want to believe it and I know it,” she retorted, making him wince and look away. “So why can’t you?”

Dingo whirled around to face her, his light brown eyes burning with fury and betrayal. Taking a step closer to her, he leaned forward and let out a furious growl, baring his fangs. “This is a sick lie. I should leave you out here to die.”

She calmly met his gaze and flicked her tail. “But you won’t.”

He whipped around with a furious snarl and lashed his tail fiercely. Turning his back on her, he glared down at the land, his eyes shimmering with anger and distrust.

Stepping forward, she gently placed her paw on his shoulder. “Dingo, listen to me. I’m telling the truth. I can prove it somehow. I know



how she looks. She's light brown with fur almost as long as yours and her eyes are exactly like your eyes."

He shoved her paw off his shoulder with a violent flick of his paw and turned away. "You learned all that from *me*."

She walked around him and looked up desperately to meet his eyes. "She's a playful spirit. She doesn't like to watch others suffer, so she looks after them. She's gentle and kind and...and she feels like she went too soft on you in the past, and..."

His eyes flashed and he whipped his head up to stare at her, his light brown irises gleaming with pain and betrayal. "Enough. How can you know any of that?"

"Because I saw her," she insisted, facing him with pleading eyes. "I talked to her."

Dingo lashed his tail and started to turn away. "This is a bunch of *lies*."

She reached forward with her paw and forced him to turn around and face her. "No, it's not. I first heard her voice before I met you, when I was lost in the desert. When I lived in your den, she visited me in a Dream and told me not to tell you about her visit because you were just starting to recover from the pain of her death and she wanted you to get stronger. I even heard her voice scream 'No' when we all thought you had died in the desert. It's not just me who can see her either. Originally I was the only one who could see her, but now I think Dash can, too. I saw her back in Jeb's forest right when we were about to set off on our journey, but Dash could sense her presence, too. Just ask him. He'll tell you it's true. Even you have sensed her presence. Right before we set off, she pressed against you and you felt it and jumped. Don't try to deny it. I saw it myself."

Dingo stared at her in shock and amazement, letting silence fill the space between them. He opened his mouth to snap back at her, then let his retort die away. Confused, wondering thoughts whirled through his mind when he thought back to the moment before they had left the forest. A twinge of shock and hope lit up his light brown eyes when he remembered feeling something brush against him but not seeing a thing when he had jumped and looked around. Just last night, he had felt something lying beside him. Months had passed by without a hint of sleep. Every time he laid down beside Saderia and Dash, he only pretended to sleep. His dark

memories kept him up all night and had taken away any chance of resting for the past few months, yet last night he had fallen asleep within a second. There was only one animal that could lull him to sleep so easily.

His eyes widened in an equal mixture of hope and disbelief. "Tell me about her," he gasped, turning to face Saderia. "Now."

Saderia gave him a small smile. "Well, she said that she's been watching over you ever since she died and she's seen what you've been through. She's been there for you even if you haven't been able to see her. She said she wanted to visit me in Dreams so that she could help me figure things out. And...There aren't four animals in the prophecy, Dingo. There are five: You, me, Dash, Jeb...and Claw."

He blinked in shock and amazement and sat in silence, struggling to take it all in. After what felt like ages, he finally stammered, "What did she say...about me?"

Saderia blinked and smiled warmly. "She said she loves you as much as ever. She misses you and she watches out for you. She's proud of you."

His eyes widened with a tiny glimmer of hope. "When...when did she say that?"

"It was back when I first saw her in your den."

He blinked, then closed his eyes and let out a long, shaky sigh, the hope fading from his expression. "What does she think of me *now*?"

She leaned forward and gently placed her tail on his shoulder. "She loves you with all of her heart. There is nothing you could do that could ever make her stop loving you. She knows you did what you had to. You did the right thing. She told me she wishes you would stop kicking yourself, but we both know that's just the way you are."

Dingo opened his eyes, their light brown depths guarded. "We're talking about Bone, aren't we?"

She sighed. "Yes, we're talking about what happened between you and Bone. And how scared you are of Claw hating you for it. I promise you that she doesn't. She saw the same things I did. She saw how Bone treated you, she *hated* how Bone treated you, and she knew he was going to kill us. She knows you did what you had to and she loves you just as much as she always did. Nothing you did makes her think any less of you. You're still her brother, the one she cares about more than anything in the world."

Dingo blinked in shock and gazed out across the desert, his eyes wide and distant with shock and disbelief. "After all this time..."

She gave him a sad smile. "She's always been looking out for you."

His eyes narrowed in amazement, as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. Gazing out at the sand dunes, he slowly shook his head. "I have to go. Just for a minute."

"Of course." She glanced at her sleeping friends and gave him a reassuring smile. "I'll tell Dash and Jeb you've gone to check for dingoes and that you'll be back soon."

He sighed. "Thanks." Giving her a lingering gaze, he slowly turned and trailed off into the desert, his eyes wide and distant and his steps unsteady, as if he was in a daze.

Taking a deep breath and trying to push away her worry, Saderia padded back toward Dash and Jeb. Shaking off her unease, she managed a slight smile, knowing she had done the right thing even if it had upset Dingo at first. Stopping next to her friends, she looked down when Dash let out a long yawn. On her other side, Jeb's eyes fluttered open and he groggily raised his head, his tired expression fading into a look of alarm.

"Where's Dingo?" he gasped, jumping to his paws in panic.

Saderia smiled and flicked him reassuringly with her tail. "Don't worry. He's just taking a walk to look for any sign of dingoes. He'll be back soon."

Blinking rapidly, Jeb relaxed and let out a sigh of relief before slumping back against the ground. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Dash give her a curious glance.

Leaning closer, he lowered his voice. "What's going on?"

She sighed and dropped her voice to a whisper. "I told him about Claw."

His eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed in sympathy. "Is he all right?"

She nodded weakly. "Yeah, he's taking it pretty well. I think he'll be fine."

Dash let out a soft breath. "Well, that's good. I hope it makes him happier."

Saderia let out a soft sigh. "I hope so too."

Sitting back, she watched the sun rise higher and higher into the sky, casting orange and yellow rays out across the sand dunes and driving away the lingering darkness of the night. An hour passed by without any sign of Dingo, but even though Dash and Jeb started to look a little uneasy, she wasn't worried. After what felt like ages, Dingo finally appeared from behind a sand dune, his head down and his tail dragging across the ground. His eyes were locked on the sand, wide and distant, as if he was seeing something they could never imagine.

"Are you all right?" she murmured when he padded closer to them.

Staying silent and keeping his eyes trained on the ground, he didn't bother to respond for several minutes. After a moment of hesitation, he forced himself to look up and stare out at the desert around him.

"Dingo?" she whispered. "Are you okay?"

He let out a sigh and didn't respond. The only thing he said was: "Let's go."

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## Courage

No one said a word as they padded through the burning desert. Even if they had spoken, Dingo wouldn't have heard anything. His light brown eyes gazed absently into the distance, barely taking in the rolling sand dunes. The world around him faded to a blur as his thoughts whirled with wonder and confusion. Thankfully, desert navigation was less of a skill and more of an instinct, or he would have gotten them lost hours ago.

Saderia's words echoed in his mind over and over again. Everything Saderia told him seemed to be true because of her eerie powers, but how could she possibly be right about Claw? He longed to believe she was still out there, watching over him somewhere, but he was terrified of getting his hopes up. Even if she did exist, he doubted he would actually see her, and without seeing her, how could he ever know if she was truly there?

A glimmer of hope and wonder shot through him when he thought about what Saderia had said. On the edge of the forest, he *had* felt *something*. Thinking back, he felt a shiver of wonder race up his spine when he remembered the days that had dragged by after Claw had died. Hundreds of cold, sleepless nights had haunted him after she had died, but he remembered one night when he had felt a warm, soothing presence that had lulled him to sleep within minutes. Sometimes during the day when he had faced the taunting of the other dingoes, he had felt a cool, calming presence beside him ease the sting of their jeers.

His heart skipped a beat when he thought about all the times he had wondered if Claw was beside him. Only one animal could calm him down so easily in those miserable times. Only one animal could have soothed him enough to fall asleep in the coldest nights. Only one animal would visit Saderia in Dreams just to help her with her journey. And Saderia was the one animal alive he knew he could trust.

His eyes widened and he froze. A rush of lightness and happiness washed over him when he realized that every time he had felt that soothing

presence, Claw really *had* been beside him. During all those long, miserable months, she had been watching him. She had been there all along. Feeling his heart skip a beat, he felt suddenly weak with relief. It was as if an enormous weight had been taken off his shoulders. For what felt like the first time in years, he smiled with pure happiness. “Ghosts exist!”

Saderia looked up in surprise and grinned. “I’m glad to hear you believe it.”

Dingo grinned at the desert around them, feeling his spirits lift. Suddenly the barren land around him didn’t seem like such an evil, cruel place. Claw might be watching him right now and smiling at him with her warm light brown eyes. Glancing around and looking up at the sky, he tried to spot her even though he knew he couldn’t.

Feeling his heart glow with happiness, he whirled around to face Saderia, Dash, and Jeb with bright light brown eyes. “She’s really out there! She still loves me!”

His tail wagged joyfully back and forth like a jovial pup. He wanted to jump up and howl to see if Claw could hear him, but in the back of his mind, he realized how dumb that would be. All this happiness was starting to scare him and he tried to return to his senses. How stupid would it be to howl and let everyone know where he was?

Trying to calm the excited beating of his heart, he tried to return to normal, but it was as if someone had flicked a switch. When he looked around at the desert, he suddenly couldn’t see a single bad thing about the blood-tainted sand or the dangerous situation they were in. Everything was funny or happy, as if nothing bad could ever happen. Looking around, he spotted the bewilderment and alarm glimmering in Jeb’s eyes and heard himself laugh. “Look at Jeb’s face!” he exclaimed. “He thinks I’ve lost my mind!”

Jeb’s face burned with embarrassment and he immediately looked down, wondering what had happened to Dingo. Saderia grinned, trying to stifle a giggle.

Dash blinked at him in shock and tried to hide a grin. “Jeez, Dingo, what’s gotten into you? You’re like a completely different animal!”

Dingo grinned and glanced at his paws, feeling his senses start to return. Taking a deep breath, he let it out slowly and tried to calm down. After a few moments, he felt the excitement gradually start to fade away

even though it lingered at the back of his mind. Looking back at his friends with a calmer, more normal expression, he just grinned. “Don’t worry, Dash, I’ll always be a jerk and a cynic. I’ll just enjoy it more now.”

Jeb tentatively looked up, his eyes narrowed with confusion. “What’s going on?”

Saderia smiled. “Nothing. Dingo and I just had a conversation.”

“Oh.” He bit his lip, wanting to ask what it was about, but not wanting to upset anyone.

Dingo let out a long sigh and glanced up at the sky. “Should we keep going for a while? Or do you want to take a break?”

Dash let out a groan, but gave a reluctant nod. “We can keep going.”

Dingo smiled and let his grateful gaze linger on Saderia’s knowing eyes for a long moment before he slowly turned around. He started to lead the way through the desert, his tail flicking happily back and forth and his eyes glowing. His paws padded lightly across the burning desert sand, barely feeling the heat or the tiredness wearing him down. The only things running through his mind were Saderia’s words and images of Claw watching him from somewhere he couldn’t see. Hours passed by under the broiling sun and his excitement slowly started to fade away even though he could still feel the joy carrying him forward. Looking around more calmly, he narrowed his eyes at the surrounding sand dunes, remembering the danger that might be lurking behind them.

“Keep your eyes peeled,” he murmured, a frown spreading over his face as he scanned the sand dunes. “We’re getting deeper into the dingoes’ territory.”

Jeb looked around wildly for any sign of enemies, while Saderia and Dash cast uneasy glances at the surrounding dunes. At the threat of danger, Dingo’s expression melted back into seriousness and his eyes darkened with a familiar shadow. His ears pricked for the sound of hidden enemies and his tail flicked tensely back and forth.

Saderia looked around in all directions before finally slowing to a stop. “Maybe we should rest for a while,” she murmured. “I know we’re all tired from walking, and if we’re getting closer to the dingoes, we need to keep up our strength.”

Dingo glanced around and nodded. “All right. That sounds like a good idea.”

Letting out a relieved sigh, Dash staggered to the ground and let his pack fall off his shoulder. He glared up at Dingo when he heard him let out a tiny snicker. Saderia sank to the ground with a long, tired breath, while Jeb dropped down beside her and laid down on his belly. Turning around to face them, Dingo sat back, panting lightly and letting his eyes flick to the dunes. While Saderia pulled off her pack and picked out a few pieces of food, Jeb glanced around and couldn't help but feel a hint of curiosity.

"I...I hate to ask," he stammered, "but what was that whole thing earlier about?"

Dingo let out a soft sigh. "I suppose we shouldn't keep him in suspense anymore."

Saderia nodded. "Yeah, we should probably get to know each other a little better. We might as well tell him everything." She glanced over at Jeb. "By the way, Jeb, how old are you? I don't think we ever found out. Dash and I are ten and Dingo's twelve."

"I'm eleven," he murmured, trying to hide the wondering gleam in his eyes. "I already heard your stories about the forest, but...Dingo, what's your story? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," he added, terrified that he would upset him again.

Dingo let out a soft breath. "I'll tell you my story, but it's not pretty, so don't say I didn't warn you." After a long moment of hesitation, he slowly began telling him about what life had been like in the pack back when all of his siblings were alive. He described how viciously the pack had hated him and how the pack treated him and other 'different' dingoes. Wincing, he told him about what his siblings—Claw, Bone, Rip, and Tear—had been like. After a hesitation, he told him how Bone had killed Fang to get power and how Rain had died as a result. His eyes clouded and darkened when he finally told him how Bone had killed Claw and disguised her death as being carried out by an outcast. Ignoring Jeb's look of horror and shock, he explained how Bone had tormented him, how he had found out the truth, and how he had finally met Saderia and Dash and saved them.

Jeb stared at him in shock and dismay when his dark, painful voice trailed off. His heart beat wildly with horror when he thought about everything Dingo had been through and a tingle of guilt seared his chest when he remembered how he had judged him before. How could anyone go



on after experiencing all of that? He couldn't even imagine the pain that would haunt him. "Y-your own brother...killed your sister?" he choked out.

Dingo gazed dully out into the distance, his eyes clouded as if he was seeing his past flash before his eyes. "Yeah," he muttered. "He said he did it to hurt me." Blinking rapidly, he glanced down at his paws and felt his fur bristle uncomfortably. "There's more. Do you want me to go on?"

Jeb blinked at him in disbelief. *More?* Trying not to wince when he thought of what else could have possibly happened, he gave him a shaky nod and stayed silent.

Dingo took a deep breath and let it out slowly before reluctantly looking up to meet Jeb's gaze. "I'm...responsible for Bone's death. I killed my brother."

Jeb's eyes widened in horror and alarm. "*What?*"

Dingo let out a sigh while Saderia tensed, her eyes narrowed in concern. Speaking in the steadiest voice he could, Dingo explained how Bone had challenged him to a fight to the death and how he had tried to kill Saderia and Dash during the battle. After a long pause, he finally told him how he had killed Bone to keep him away from them and how the pack had chased him down. "The pack held a funeral for Bone when they got back to camp," he muttered. "Two days after that, my father died, and after his funeral, Rock took his place as Leader of the pack. Rock's made it his sole goal in life to hunt me down now that he's Leader, which is why I really want to try to keep out of sight around here."

Jeb stared at him in horror and incredulity, unable to say a word. A hint of fear crept up his spine when he stared at Dingo and realized he was looking at a murderer, but he tried to push the feeling away. Saderia and Dash seemed comfortable around him, but he didn't know whether he should be terrified of Dingo or feel sorry for him. Trying to ignore his fear, he took a shaky breath. "That's...that's some story."

Dingo just shrugged and glanced down at the ground. "Are we all clear now?"

Saderia smiled a weak smile. "I think it's better now that we all know everything."

Dash nodded, then let out a sigh. "I suppose this means we have to start moving."

Saderia tried to hide a grin. “Yes, we have to move.” She paused and turned nervously to her canine friend. “By the way, Dingo, you *do* know where we are, right?”

He rolled his eyes. “Stop worrying. Of course I do.”

Karenisha laid listlessly on her bed, staring at the walls. Days had passed by without any sign of Saderia and Dash. Cia and Jash avoided her like the plague, terrified of letting her see the worry in their eyes. Every now and then, they gave her a piece of food and she took it without a word, not wanting to argue. They were the only family she had left and a dark feeling warned her that they might be the next ones she would lose.

Memories of Saderia, Dash, and Makero whirled through her mind, making her wince every time she recalled seeing her daughter’s smiling face and her adopted son’s kind expression. How long until Cia and Jash became nothing but memories? How long until the last of her family was taken away from her and she was left alone?

Her heart ached with pain and hopelessness. Anger rose in her chest when she thought of the eerie forest waiting just outside her home. For six months, their new home had done nothing but tear them down and try to destroy them and now it had forced three of her family members to run away to their deaths. How many more animals would suffer? A glimmer of hope lit her eyes when she wondered if she could find another home for her kingdom. Maybe if she could find another place to settle, she could stop the animals of her kingdom from suffering. Maybe if she left on her own, she could discover a new place and save the two members of her family she had left.

Part of her wanted to believe that Saderia and Dash would return, but after everything that had happened, she couldn’t let herself be fooled. They had no chance of surviving, and if Karenisha stayed in the forest, she stood no chance of surviving either.

The roaring sound of pounding paw steps echoed in Saderia’s ears, making her heart beat frantically with fear. The darkness in front of her vanished in a ray of blinding yellow sunlight when she opened her eyes. Heat waves rose up from the sandy ground around her, turning the air and the blue sky into a blurry, hazy scene. Looking around wildly at the blurry

desert, she searched desperately for any sign of life in the barren land and felt the ground underneath her begin to tremble.

A sand dune burst apart on her left, making her whip around to stare in horror as an orange figure leapt out from behind the dune, letting out a raw, earsplitting roar. Shadowed figures chased after the animal. Their wild screams and yells rose in the air as the orange figure darted away, churning up thick clumps of sand in its haste to get away. A scream rose in her throat when a tiny popping sound pierced through the air and the orange figure let out a raw, painful roar, collapsing to the ground.

Darkness crashed over her, whisking the hazy scene away. Low, dangerous growls echoed in the blackness around her, making her fur bristle with fear. She felt hot breath on her fur and her claws dug into the dark sand beneath her when she heard the growls grow louder and louder. A soft, cackling laugh sounded somewhere in the distance, but when she looked around, the snarls died away, leaving her in silence and darkness.

The blackness faded away slowly, making her breath catch in her throat when she found herself back in the desert. Sunlight glimmered in the sky, lighting up the land. Sand dunes surrounded her, but the land in front of her was anything but barren. A thin, light blue river ran through the sand, making soft, lapping sounds. Propped up around the peaceful river were eerie, brownish-green, triangular tarps. Stacks of boxes and crates had been piled up next to the tarps and a burned out campfire sat in the center of the camp next to a pot filled with food. Set up next to the river were stacks of cages filled with animals.

Her heart skipped and she looked up rapidly when a fold of the tarp billowed off to the side, revealing a human covered in long, white cloth. Other white-clothed humans crept out of the tarps and walked through the camp carrying eerie translucent tubes filled with a bright green liquid. One human carried several different tubes filled with liquids of every color. She watched as he walked toward the cages and felt her heart stop when he suddenly tripped on a log in the campfire. Frozen to the spot, she watched as he stumbled forward with a sharp yelp. The loud, splintering sound of breaking glass filled the air when the glass tubes smashed against the ground. The instant the multicolor liquid mixed together, a loud, deafening roar shattered her eardrums and a rush of heat and fire washed over her like a wave, radiating from the center of the camp. The camp disappeared in

front of her in a violent, fiery explosion until there was nothing left but darkness.

Saderia's eyes shot open and she sat up with a sharp gasp, her heart pounding in her chest. Looking around wildly, she felt her breath catch in her throat when bright sunlight glinted in the sky, blinding her before revealing light brown sand dunes. Blinking rapidly, she staggered shakily to her paws, then froze when she heard a low growl.

Whipping around, she felt her eyes widen in surprise. Just inches away from her, Dash and Dingo stood with their backs to each other, facing opposite directions, baring their fangs, and letting their eyes scanning the sand dunes. Jeb stood huddled beside them, quivering with fear and staring out at the desert with wide, terrified blue and green eyes.

Saderia blinked in surprise, then jumped when she heard a low, dangerous growl echo from somewhere behind the sand dunes. Staggering forward, she pressed up against Dash and looked around wildly. Low snarls and violent growls sounded from what seemed like every direction, interrupting the normally peaceful silence of the morning.

"What's happening?" she choked out, struggling to push away memories of the Dream and search for the source of the growls.

"Shh!" Dash and Dingo hissed at the same time and narrowed their eyes, searching the land for any sign of their enemies and keeping their ears pricked.

Saderia stared at them in alarm, then jumped when she heard a low, dark chuckle sound from behind one of the sand dunes.

"I think I smell a coward. Could it be?"

All of the fur on her back rose and bristled with alarm at the sound of the cold snarl. The low, guttural growl sounded almost exactly like Bone's voice.

Dingo let out a low growl. "Rock. He knows I'm here. This is an attack."

Jeb looked up with wide, horrified eyes and shook with fear. "What do we do?"

"Wait," Dingo growled. "And fight. That's all we *can* do." Narrowing his eyes, he bared his fangs and let his fur bristle, waiting for the dingoes to show themselves. Behind him, Dash unsheathed his claws and

lashed his tail, while Saderia let her claws slip into the sand and looked around wildly, trying to judge where their voices were coming from.

“Again with this, Rock?”

Another exasperated voice sounded from behind the sand dune, making Dingo’s heart sink with dismay when he realized he recognized it.

“Rip,” Saderia guessed, glancing at Dingo out of the corner of her eye. “Right?”

He nodded with a sick feeling in his stomach and tried not to wince. How would Rip react to seeing him alive again? Would he attack him and leave him to die like he had done after the fight with Bone? His heart ached with pain at the thought, but he tried to push his sorrow away and focus on the fight he knew was coming.

Saderia pricked her ears when Rock’s low growl echoed around her, seeming to come from behind several sand dunes at once.

“Shut your mouth, Rip,” the dingo Leader snarled.

“Jeez!” Dingo winced when he heard the familiar annoyed yet playful tone in Rip’s voice. “You’re obsessed. How many times do we have to tell you? Dingo is dead!”

A low snarl and a sharp yelp of pain suddenly erupted from behind the dunes.

“Are you disrespecting me?” Rock snarled. “*You*? A stupid little follower?”

Rip growled uneasily. “I just told the truth. You don’t have to get so defensive.”

“Maybe we should just leave.” Dingo pricked his ears at the sound of a new, soft voice and flattened his ears when he recognized the voice of a dingo named Lightning.

Rock let out a low, furious growl. “No way. I know he’s around here somewhere.”

“That’s what you said the last few times,” Rip retorted.

Rock snarled. “You’re as bad as Dingo. One more remark and I’ll exile you!”

“Okay, okay!”

Silence fell over the dunes until Rock let out a low growl. “Actually, Rip, let’s test your loyalty. Dingo’s got to be over that sand dune. Why don’t you go attack him?”

“You’re a lunatic,” Rip muttered with a dark, annoyed growl. “But fine, I’ll do it. Although I don’t know how I’m supposed to fight with nothing but air.”

Rock let out a long, exasperated sigh. “Just go. *Now!*”

“Okay, okay! Chill out!”

Dingo narrowed his eyes, scanning the dunes for any sign of his brother and feeling his heart ache. He didn’t want to have to fight his own family again, especially not Rip. No matter what his second oldest brother did, Dingo could never hate him.

A flash of red fur suddenly appeared at the top of a sand dune, making every eye turn to face him as the sun lit up Rip’s bright red fur. The dingo’s yellow eyes were dull with boredom as he trotted down the sand dune, but when he looked up, he froze and his eyes widened in shock. In less than a second, his face changed from an expression of boredom to shock, confusion, denial, horror, hope, all that way back to shock. Gaping in disbelief, Rip stood frozen to the spot for what seemed like an eternity before his eyes grew wide and he let out a stunned gasp. “*You’re alive!*”

Dingo sighed in exasperation. Rip was definitely not a master of discretion. So much for trying to weasel his way out of the fight or sneak away undetected. Taking a deep breath, Dingo waved a paw as calmly as possible. “Hey, Rip! Long time no see!”

Rip stared at him in disbelief. “You...you *died*, but...you’re alive... but...” Blinking several times and shaking his head, he staggered down the sand dune and stood just a few paces away from Dingo, his eyes wide with incredulity. “It really *is* you!”

“Yes, I’m alive,” he muttered, narrowing his eyes. “No thanks to you, brother.”

Rip blinked in surprise, then instantly bristled. “What was I supposed to do?” he snapped, narrowing his eyes and making the shock vanish from his gaze, as if they were resuming an old argument. “You killed our brother! What is *wrong* with you?”

Dingo lashed his tail fiercely back and forth. “You don’t understand!”

“No, I don’t!” Rip snapped, baring his fangs in a snarl. “I don’t understand why the guy who always acted so high and mighty because he

was above such *horrid things* as *murder* turned around the first chance he got and killed his own brother!”

Dingo gaped at him. “I didn’t kill him the first chance I got! I did what I had to!”

Rip curled his lip. “You’re a sick, disgusting dingo!”

Dingo glared at him and gritted his teeth. “Look who’s talking! You purposely jumped in front of me when those dingoes were chasing me so I would die!”

Rip flicked his tail with a flippant snort. “Well, why didn’t you die?”

Dingo narrowed his eyes. “Nice, Rip. I suppose you’re going to sell me out again to some more of your false friends since you failed the last time.”

Rip glared at him. “How can I sell you out when I don’t even like you?”

Jeb shivered beside Saderia as he watched the two dingoes. “What’s going on?”

Dash let out a dry sigh and rolled his eyes. “Family reunion.”

Dingo let out a furious growl, ignoring them entirely. “Because I expected you to at least have some tiny scrap of decency!”

“And I expected the same from you!” Rip yelled, his yellow eyes flashing.

“You don’t understand!”

He let out a furious growl. “What’s to understand?”

Dingo gritted his teeth and met his flaming yellow gaze. “Bone killed Claw.”

Rip opened his mouth to snap back at him, then froze and stared at him in horror, his eyes growing wide. Staggering back a few paces, he gaped at him in shock. A tiny glimmer of fear and wonder flashed in his yellow irises before he let out a furious snarl and narrowed his eyes. “You liar! You would make up any story to justify what you did! Bone would never do that!”

Dingo snorted. “Wouldn’t he? You saw how he treated me and I don’t think he treated you, his ‘friend,’ any better. Who’s to say he wasn’t capable of killing our sister?”

Rip glared at him, his yellow eyes blazing with hatred. “You manipulating freak! Stop messing with my head!” He spat at him. “I’m glad

I didn't help you, you disgusting traitor, and I'll never believe a word you say! I wish Bone had torn you to pieces!"

Dingo just shook his head. "You know what, Rip? I don't care. I just don't care anymore. Believe what you want to believe. I'm done with the pack." He curled his lip. "Go ahead and call your new master, Rock, since all you are is a stupid minion. Why don't you go ask him to kill me since you can't deal with the truth?"

A furious snarl tore out of Rip's throat and he glared at Dingo, practically shaking with rage. "You...you..." He bared his fangs. "*I'll rip you apart!*" Letting out a vicious howl, he lunged forward, then froze when a gruff shout echoed through the desert.

"Stop!"

Staggering to a halt just a few paces away from Dingo, Rip whipped around and stared in disbelief as a dingo with long, dusty dark brown fur strolled over the top of a sand dune. A smug smile spread across the dingo's face when he spotted the two brothers.

Rip gaped at him. "What? You sent me to kill him and now you're telling me to *stop*?"

The strong dark brown dingo flicked his tail, his dark brown eyes glinting. "I didn't send you over here to kill him, I sent you to scope out the situation," he replied in a cool, gruff voice. "And don't talk back to me like that." Glancing away from Rip's outraged expression, the dingo looked up at Dingo and stared past him to Saderia and Dash, who stood just a few paces behind their canine friend, hiding Jeb from view.

A smirk crept across the dark dingo's face. "Dingo."

Dingo narrowed his eyes and met his gaze with a cold, guarded stare. "Rock."

An eerie gleam lit up Rock's dark brown eyes. "I knew it," he whispered. "I knew you were still out here somewhere. So...I've finally found you."

Dingo faced him darkly without moving. "Looks like it."

Rock grinned and cast a glance over at Rip as a sleek, yellow dingo poked his head up from behind a sand dune and cautiously trotted toward them. Flattening his ears uneasily, the yellow dingo slowly stepped forward to stand a few paces behind Rock.



The newest dingo Leader snickered when he saw the bitter expression on Rip's face. "Did you have a nice reunion with your long-lost brother, Rip?"

Rip gaped at him, his eyes flashing with outrage. "You enjoyed that, didn't you?"

Rock carelessly flicked his tail. "So what if I did? It served its purpose of getting Dingo warmed up for the fight."

Rip stared at him in shock as if unable to come up with any words to describe how furious he was. Dingo tried to suppress a sigh when he realized that instead of challenging his great Leader, Rip just bit his lip and sat back with a low, inaudible growl.

Tearing his eyes off his older brother, Dingo turned to face Rock with a cold, guarded gaze. "There doesn't need to be a fight."

Rock snorted and raised an eyebrow. "Oh, here it comes again. Dingo, the pacifist, always wanting to compromise...the wolf in sheep's clothing." Dingo dug his claws into the sand and gritted his teeth when Rock sneered. "Oh, you had us all fooled, Dingo. Maybe you used to be the dingo you pretended to be...until you got a taste of blood."

Dingo narrowed his eyes. "I don't want any trouble, Rock. I'm just passing through. Why don't you just leave us alone?"

Rock smirked. "No, I don't think so." Taking a step closer, he narrowed his dark brown eyes and bared his fangs in Dingo's face. "You're going to pay with your life."

Dingo let out a low growl. "Why? It's not like you care that Bone's dead, so long as you still have your power."

Rock snickered and grinned. "So you know?"

"What? That you're the new leader of the pack?" He rolled his eyes. "Of course I know. You taking over might be the worst thing to happen to the pack yet. It makes me wonder what the point of killing Bone was if his double was just going to take his place."

Rock let out a low, humorless chuckle. "You may have gotten rid of Bone, but he was weak and he got cocky. I'm smarter and stronger than you'll ever be and I'm going to make you pay for what you did. So just because you managed to kill him, don't think you're something special. You're still the weak, pathetic Dingo I've always known." His eyes darted over Dingo's shoulder and a sneer spread across his face. "I see you're still

hanging around with the forest food. Really, does it get any lower than you?"

Dingo narrowed his eyes. "Oh, I've seen dingoes much lower than that, Rock, but keep talking since hearing your own voice makes you so happy. It's just words."

Rock just laughed and shook his head. "You always have a response to everything, don't you? Fine, then, enough talking."

Dingo dug his claws into the sand. "Just leave us alone and we won't bother you."

"Begging for your forest food again, I see. It's definitely you." Rock raised an eyebrow and smirked. "This will be an easy fight. You're outnumbered."

Dingo lashed his tail. "It's three to three."

The dingo Leader flicked his tail with a shrug. "Maybe, but real dingoes are much more fit to fight than forest food and pathetic 'different' dingoes like you."

Tearing her gaze off them, Saderia leaned down to hiss in Jeb's ear. "When the fighting starts, run and hide behind one of the sand dunes. We'll find you when it's over."

Jeb shivered in horror and just barely managed to nod. His heart beat frantically as he stared at the bristling dingoes. His mind whirled with terror and he almost couldn't believe he was really about to witness a fight between his friends and the eerie dingoes.

Ignoring the whispering behind him, Dingo narrowed his eyes. "I think you'll find we're perfectly fit to fight. Your 'best friend' can attest to that."

Rock gritted his teeth. "If you're so confident, why don't we test your theory?" Without tearing his eyes away from Dingo, he signaled for Lightning and Rip to join him. Looking uneasy, Lightning stumbled forward while Rip reluctantly stalked over to them, casting mutinous glances at the dark brown dingo. Noticing Rip's glares, Rock let out an exasperated sigh. "Stop pouting, Rip, you're going to get the fight you want." Ignoring Rip's cold glare, Rock turned and smirked at Dingo, his dark eyes flashing. "Attack!"

Rip let out a furious snarl and lunged at Dingo the instant the word left Rock's mouth. Dingo let out a yelp of pain when his brother's claws

dug into his shoulders and leapt away from him before Rip could push him to the ground. Staggering away, he whirled around and saw a yellow streak of fur race toward one of the surrounding sand dunes. A loud, dangerous snarl split the air when Rock lunged past him and leapt toward Saderia, and a rush of air rustled his fur when Lightning raced toward Dash.

Feeling his heart skip with alarm when he heard Saderia let out a painful hiss, he tried to turn around, then let out a growl when Rip jumped in front of him, lashing out with his claws. Dingo ducked just in time to avoid being slashed across the face and backed away slowly, a growl rumbling in his throat. Lunging forward, he tried to move past him, but the red dingo instantly jumped in front of him to block his path.

Rip let out a low growl and glared at him. "What's the matter with you? Why aren't you fighting back this time?"

Dingo gritted his teeth. "Because I don't want to fight you!" He tried to dodge around him to get to Rock, but Rip barred his path and shoved him back. Lashing his tail, Dingo took a step forward and bared his fangs in his brother's face. "Get out of the way."

Rip curled his lip. "No way! You don't scare me. This is my fight!" Pulling back, he raked his claws across Dingo's face, sending him stumbling backward. Dingo winced and struggled to stop his fall, but before he could catch himself, Rip slammed into him and shoved him to the ground. Pain burned in his chest and blood splattered the ground when Rip dug his claws into his belly. Letting out a loud howl of pain, Dingo kicked Rip away and leapt to his paws when his brother stumbled back with a low groan.

Blinking away droplets of blood, he looked up to see his brother's yellow eyes flash with fury. Letting out a low snarl, Rip lunged toward him, but Dingo leapt out of the way just in time. Whipping around, Rip dove toward him and dug his fangs into his leg. Blood poured out of the nasty wound when Dingo yanked his leg away with a loud, agonizing howl. Sticky blood dripped down his leg, seeping into his bristly brown fur. Looking up with narrowed light brown eyes, Dingo let out a cry when Rip lunged toward him, pushing him down and slamming his back against the ground.

With a low snarl, Dingo dug his claws into Rip's shoulder and rolled him around, slamming him against the ground. Rip pushed him away and

sent them both rolling across the ground, clawing and biting at each other. Ignoring the burning sting of pain that raced up his spine when Rip slammed him against the sand, he looked over his shoulder and gasped in horror when he saw Saderia stumble away from Rock with a sharp hiss of pain. Blood seeped from a deep wound in her shoulder and anguish gleamed in her amber eyes. Past her, Dash struggled to get a hit on Lightning, but whenever he tried to lash out at him, the quick dingo darted away to confuse him. Before Dash knew what had happened, Lightning had darted behind him to send a painful blow to the back of his head.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dingo caught something red and whirled around just in time to catch Rip's paw with his own before the red dingo could rake his claws across his eyes. Lunging forward, Dingo sunk his fangs into Rip's leg and tried to ignore a tingle of guilt when his older brother let out a raw howl of pain. When Rip jerked away from him, Dingo shoved him as hard as he could and forced him to stumble backwards. Leaping to his paws, he lunged toward Rip before he could catch himself and pushed him backwards, slamming his back against the ground and digging his claws into his shoulders. A low growl rumbled in his throat as he held Rip down.

Rip let out a cold snarl and stared up into his eyes. "You would kill me, too?"

Dingo winced, pulling his bloody claws out of his brother's shoulder. "Never."

Rip scoffed and tore into his paws with his claws before shoving him away. He leapt to his paws as Dingo let out a painful groan and stumbled backwards, his paws staggering painfully across the sandy ground. Glancing at Rip out of the corner of his eye, Dingo instantly whirled around and started to race toward Rock to get him away from Saderia, but Rip immediately lunged forward and landed in front of him with a low snarl.

Dingo let out a sharp growl of frustration. "*Move!*"

Rip narrowed his eyes. "Forget it!" He took a threatening step toward Dingo and lashed out with his claws, missing his face by inches to provoke him.

Gritting his teeth, Dingo staggered backward as his brother stalked closer, trying to dodge around him and feeling a growl rise in his throat

every time Rip swerved to block his way. His eyes widened in pain when he heard Saderia let out a sharp shriek of pain. Without thinking, he narrowed his eyes and lunged forward with a vicious snarl. Rip leapt toward him and slammed into him, throwing them both to the ground with a rough slam. Letting out a furious growl, Dingo sank his fangs deep into Rip's shoulder. Biting back a yelp of agony, Rip yanked his shoulder out of his grasp and kicked him away, letting his claws dig into Dingo's belly. He lunged forward when Dingo stumbled backward and tried to throw him to the ground. Rolling over, Dingo struggled to push him back, but Rip slashed him across the face before jumping to his paws.

Staggering to his paws, Dingo whirled around just in time to see Rip race toward him. Drawing back, he raked his claws across Rip's face and pushed him backward, ignoring his sharp cry of pain. Bright red flecks of blood dotted the ground, seeping into the sand and staining it dark red. Narrowing his eyes, Dingo raced toward Rock, then let out a furious snarl when Rip wiped the blood out of his eyes and yanked him back.

Tearing himself away from Rip and lashing out with his claws, Dingo let out a furious snarl. "Let me go! I'm not going to kill you!" He wiped away the blood dripping into his eyes and left a crimson smear across his face. "Stop asking for it!"

"You idiot." Rip curled his lip and lowered his voice. "I know you're not killing anybody. I'm only fighting you so I don't have to kill your forest food."

Dingo blinked in surprise and froze, but Rip didn't take the opportunity to go for his throat when his guard was down. "W-what?"

Rip rolled his eyes and let out a low, quiet growl. "If I killed your forest food, it would hurt you worse than if I ripped your throat out. I'm not that cruel, Dingo."

Dingo stared at him in shock, unable to speak. A tiny glow of happiness that one of his siblings still cared about him lit up his eyes. "Thank you," he choked out.

Rip curled his lip and clubbed him over the head. "This is a fight, you moron. Stop thanking me and start ripping me to shreds."

Dingo stumbled back, his eyes wide with shock. "I...I thought you hated me."

“I do,” Rip muttered, his eyes flashing. “In fact, I wish you were dead. I wish Bone had killed you so I would never have to see your stupid face again. But killing someone to hurt someone else is just disgusting and I’m not that cruel that I would want you to live like you did after Claw died. You would be better off dead.”

Blinking rapidly, Dingo couldn’t help but smile with the tiniest hint of hope and gratitude. Narrowing his eyes, Rip gave him a murderous glare and lunged toward him.

Dodging away from his weak attack, Dingo whirled around to face Rip and felt the smile fade when he looked over his brother’s shoulder and saw Saderia fighting against Rock. He *had* to fend off Rock. It was much less dangerous for Saderia to fight Rip rather than Rock and he had to make sure she didn’t get killed.

He whipped around when Rip lashed out with his claws. Dodging his half-hearted attack, he let out a low, urgent growl. “Rip, if you don’t fight them, Rock will kill them!”

Rip let out a low growl, a hint of fear lighting up his eyes. “If I don’t kill them, Rock will know something’s up. Fighting you is easier. *You* actually can fight me off.”

“They can put up a fight,” Dingo pleaded. “Please, Rip.”

Rip hesitated for a long moment, shifting indecisively back and forth on his paws. Studying Dingo’s desperate gaze, he finally narrowed his eyes and leaned forward to snarl in his face. “Fine, I’ll do it, but you owe me your life, you pitiful creep. I’m only doing this because you’re my brother because otherwise I hate your guts!” Shoving him back as hard as he could, he whipped around and raced toward Saderia. “Eyes on the prize, Rock!” Rip called, lunging toward Saderia. “I’ll take care of this little snack!”

Gritting his teeth, Dingo raced in front of Rock just as Saderia shoved Rip away. “Your fight is with *me*,” he snarled, lunging toward the dark dingo. His claws tore into Rock’s shoulders, splattering the ground with blood, but before he could push him to the ground, Rock turned and threw him away. The breath left Dingo’s throat when he smacked against the ground and felt pain explode in his back. Rock leapt toward him and slammed him against the sand when he struggled to get up. Letting out a vicious snarl, he dug his claws into Dingo’s shoulders and sank his fangs

into his skin just inches away from his neck. Letting out a howl of agony, Dingo struggled to push him away, twisting out of his grasp and tearing the wound even deeper. Ignoring the searing pain of the wound, he leapt to his paws and lashed out at Rock, smacking his paw against his jaws and hearing a loud snap. Jerking back, Rock raked his claws across Dingo's belly, making him wince and stagger backward. Blood dribbled onto the sandy ground.

Behind him, Saderia collapsed onto the ground, her shoulders stinging with pain and her body burning with the agony of the wounds covering her sides. Rip tried to pin her down, but she slashed her claws across his face, forcing him to stumble away with a cry. She leapt to her paws and faced him with bristling fur while he staggered away, touching the scars running across his face. "Jeez, you forest food have sharp claws," he muttered.

Saderia lashed her tail. "You haven't seen anything yet!" Letting out a hiss, she leapt toward him and tried to sink her claws into his shoulders to push him back, but Rip whipped her away from him and threw her onto the ground. She let out a gasp when she slammed against the sand and Rip instantly lunged forward to sink his fangs deep into her shoulder. He slammed his paws against hers to pin her down, then yanked back with a yelp when she dug her claws deep into his paws. Pushing herself up, she slashed his belly with her claws and shoved him away. Rip let out a howl of pain and staggered back, his belly streaming with blood. Panting and gritting his teeth, he glared at her and tried not to show how hurt he was. "Feisty forest food," he muttered. "That's just what I need today."

Trying to ignore how eerily similar Rip was to Dingo, she leapt to her paws and glared at him, preparing for a fight. Her fur was stained with blood and the sand beneath her was speckled with a dull crimson color. Facing Rip, she dug her claws into the sand and let her gaze wander past him to check on her closest friend.

Dash lashed out at Lightning, but the yellow dingo darted away from him before he could touch him. Before Dash could turn around, the dingo raked his claws across his face, sending him sprawling backward with a cry of pain. The skinny dingo leapt on top of him and tried to pin him down, but Dash slashed his claws across his face. Stumbling away with a sharp yelp, Lightning struggled to wipe the blood away while Dash leapt

to his paws. Letting out a low snarl, he lunged toward Lightning, but the quick dingo darted out of his grasp. Whirling around to face him, Dash bunched his muscles when Lightning started to race toward him. When the fast dingo was only inches away from him, he let out a loud snarl and lunged toward him, slamming into him in midair and shoving him back toward the ground. Pinning him down, Dash gritted his teeth when Lightning let out a painful howl. Twisting violently, Lightning shoved him away, sending them rolling across the desert sand, clawing viciously at each other and snarling in fury.

Hiding behind a sand dune, Jeb looked up at the sound of a loud shriek, feeling his fur rise in alarm. His eyes widened when he spotted the vicious fighting just a few feet away. His heart beat frantically and he felt sick as he watched the violence. He gaped in horror at the bright red blood covering the ground and shuddered at the sound of the raw, agonized screams and howls echoing through the desert. Why couldn't the violence stop?

Feeling tense and terrified, he felt an overwhelming rush of guilt when he realized how useless he was to help them. His heart ached with the longing to help his friends, but the thought of trying to fight the eerie dingoes made him feel so faint that the bloody scene in front of him blurred. Pain seemed to race up his spine every time he saw claws dig into one of his friends' sides and he could almost feel the sticky blood seeping into his fur. Shivering, he squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to look away when he started to feel nauseous. His only hope was for the horror in front of him to end soon without anyone getting too badly hurt, but he was beginning to think that was too much to ask for.

An agonized howl split the tense air. Dingo stumbled back when Rock twisted his paw, pushed him to the ground, and dug his claws into his shoulders. The overpowering scent of blood washed over him when he slammed into a crimson puddle and his own blood seeped out around Rock's sharp claws. Gritting his teeth, Dingo struggled to get away. With a furious glare, Rock raised his paw to bring it down on Dingo's leg, but Dingo managed to roll away just seconds before Rock could break his leg. Diving forward, Dingo sank his claws deep into Rock's paw and twisted it to trip him up and send him sprawling to the ground. Ignoring his howl,



Dingo dove toward Rock while he was down, then stumbled back with a howl when Rock raked his claws across his stomach.

Leaping to his paws, Rock stalked toward him with a dangerous snarl. He lashed out to claw at Dingo's face, but Dingo ducked, his paws slipping through the blood covering the sand. Backing away as Rock advanced on him, Dingo glanced over his shoulder to see Saderia and Dash fighting against Rip and Lightning. Feeling a tingle of relief when he realized they were holding their own, he looked up to meet Rock's gaze with a challenging gleam in his eyes and whirled around to race away from him, hoping he would follow. With a low snarl, Rock lunged after him, leaving a cloud of sand behind him. Casting glances back, Dingo led him away from Saderia and Dash so he couldn't hurt them and raced up the side of the closest dune. A loud howl tore out of his throat when Rock lunged at him and dug his claws into Dingo's back. Stumbling forward, he collapsed onto the ground, sending them both tumbling down the side of the dune.

Locking his claws in Dingo's shoulders, Rock tried to bite at his neck as they rolled downward, but Dingo smacked him away. Pain spread to every inch of Dingo's body when they slammed against the ground at the bottom of the sand dune. Twisting in pain, Dingo landed hard on his back while Rock rolled away from him with a yelp of surprise. Soaked in blood and caked in sand, Dingo struggled to his paws and looked up just in time to see Rock stagger to his paws and dive toward him with a vicious snarl.

Shoving him back to the ground, Rock lunged for his throat with yellow, blood-covered fangs. A howl of agony tore out of Dingo's chest when Rock's teeth sank deep into his neck, but he forced himself to dig his claws into Rock's shoulders and shove him away with every last bit of strength he had left. The dingo Leader stumbled away with a cry of pain. Jumping to his paws, Dingo faced the dark Leader, then let out a cry of pain when Rock smacked him across the face. Stinging pain burned his forehead as blood seeped down past his eyes. Before he could fight back, Rock lunged forward and slammed his paw on Dingo's paw before shoving him to the ground. Digging his claws in, Rock held Dingo's paw in place as he staggered to the side, making it twist and sending agonizing pain up his leg. Feeling his breath catch in his throat, Dingo sank to the ground. Rock sneered down at his blood-covered form and chuckled as he leaned toward him to deliver the final blow.

Jeb looked up at the sound of a painful howl and stared over the top of the sand dune with wide, terrified blue and green eyes. A rush of shock and horror washed over him when he saw Rock pin Dingo against the ground and smirk down at him, his fangs dripping with blood and his sides covered in wounds. His mouth gaped open in terror as he watched Dingo struggle to get away. Screams and howls echoed from behind the other sand dunes where Saderia and Dash fought with the other dingoes. Their cries of pain and Dingo's desperate thrashing burned in his mind. He couldn't stand to see his friends get hurt any longer. Without thinking, he lunged to the top of the sand dune with a sharp cry.

*"Stop!"*

Letting out a low chuckle, Rock leaned closer to Dingo's face and bared his fangs, then froze at the sound of the strange, high-pitched voice. Frowning, he glanced up in annoyance and kept his claws buried in Dingo's paws, but when he caught sight of the strange creature standing at the top of the sand dune, his eyes widened in shock. Stumbling backward, he stared up at the creature in alarm, his mouth gaped open in disbelief. Looking up, Dingo staggered to his paws with a shaky gasp and whipped around to follow Rock's gaze. His eyes widened when he spotted Jeb.

Behind them, the snarls and shrieks of battle died away. Abandoning their fight, Saderia, Dash, Rip, and Lightning padded cautiously to the top of the sand dune they had been fighting behind to see who had shouted. Their eyes narrowed in confusion, but when Rip and Lightning caught sight of Jeb, their eyes grew wide with disbelief. Gaping at the strange creature, they stared at him in shock. Following their gazes, Saderia felt a sharp jolt of surprise when she saw Jeb. What was he doing showing himself during the fight?

Frozen in place, Jeb looked out with fearful eyes and shaky legs, seeming to shrink beneath their stunned stares. The three dingoes stared at him in dismay and incredulity, unable to move or speak. Silence fell over the desert.

Rock took a step back, his eyes narrowing in alarm. "What *is* that thing?"

"It's a freak!" Rip exclaimed.

A hint of fear gleamed in the dingoes' eyes and they took an unconscious step backward. Glancing around at the frightened dingoes in

surprise, Saderia's eyes lit up with a sudden hopeful idea. Looking up toward Jeb, she discreetly motioned with her paw for him to step closer, hoping it might scare the dingoes away.

Jeb looked up at Saderia and felt a twinge of unease and fear when he realized she wanted him to come closer. Peering fearfully around at all the dingoes, he took a deep breath and slowly moved closer, hoping that Saderia wouldn't lead him into danger.

The yellow dingo named Lightning let out a whimper when the strange creature stepped forward, and before anyone could stop him, he whipped around and raced away in a blur of yellow fur. Rock and Rip looked up at him in shock, then exchanged a long glance before turning back to stare at Jeb with wide, frightened dark brown and yellow eyes. The red hair on Rip's back stood on end when Jeb took another step forward and he and Rock took another uncertain step backward.

"R-rock?" Rip stammered.

Rock whipped around to stare at Dingo, his eyes gleaming with fury, then whirled around to look at Jeb. A glimmer of fear lit up his dark brown irises. Gritting his teeth, he whipped around and raced away from them. "Retreat!"

Saderia's fur rustled when Rip lunged past her to chase after his Leader. His dark red tail streamed out behind him as he bolted back in the direction of his camp. She caught a flash of his terrified yellow eyes when he turned to look back before he and Rock leapt over the top of a nearby sand dune and disappeared out of sight.

Feeling a rush of relief and ignoring the pain burning in the wounds covering her sides, Saderia let out a shaky sigh and stumbled down the sand dune to stand next to Dingo, her amber eyes narrowed with worry. Dash staggered down beside her, his chest heaving with pants and his fur matted with blood. Limping toward her, Dingo let out a shaky breath and tried not to wince. Jeb stared at them in horror and slid down the sand dune, his heart still pounding frantically with fear.

"You all look horrible," he choked out, gaping at their bloody appearances.

Dingo let out a sigh and flicked his tail carelessly. "I've looked worse."

Saderia glanced down at her sticky, red-covered paws and tried not to wince. "We have, too," she murmured, casting a worried glance at Dash and cringing.

Dash looked up at her and frowned, his eyes narrowing in concern. "Are you sure you're okay?" he demanded, wiping a stream of blood off her face. "You do look bad."

She managed a weak smile and flicked him gently with her tail. "I'm fine. You don't look too good yourself. I think we're all okay, though, right?"

Dingo nodded and examined his twisted paw. "Yeah, I'm fine. Dash?"

Dash nodded, keeping his eyes locked on Saderia.

Jeb stared at them in horror. "What was that all about? Who were those guys?"

Dingo heaved a sigh. "Just a feud with old enemies. That was Rock, the guy who's after me. The ones with him were Rip, my brother, and Lightning, a dingo in the pack."

Dash let his gaze linger on Saderia for a moment longer before a light came on in his amber eyes. He turned to look at Jeb in incredulity. "They were afraid of you."

Jeb shivered nervously, feeling almost light-headed. "I was afraid of them."

"Yeah, but they didn't know that." Saderia glanced up at Jeb and frowned, her eyes suddenly glimmering with curiosity and wonder. "If you can scare off dingoes like Rock...that might come in handy."

Jeb blinked in surprise. "What do you mean by that?"

Saderia just shrugged and grinned. "We'll see."

Darkness covered the inside of the den, casting long, eerie shadows across the walls and darkening Karenisha's matted orange fur. Her eyes stared bleakly out at the dark walls and the blackness around her, dull and lifeless. A tiny piece of paper laid flat across the cold bed underneath her and a pen trembled in her paw. Memories of Saderia, Dash, and Makero flashed through her mind. Trying not to wince, she gritted her teeth and stared at the paper before forcing herself to scratch out the words she longed to say.

She let the pen drop onto the bed when she had finally finished her tiny letter. After staring down at the words for what felt like ages, she painfully pushed herself to her paws and turned around to face the entrance. Taking a deep breath, she slowly crept into the main room of the den. A cold gust of wind swept toward her from outside, but she ignored the chill and padded silently toward the entrance of the den. She let out a soft sigh when her paws brushed the stiff grass and turned to look up at her den one final time.

“Goodbye,” she whispered.

“Karenisha?” Cia let out a yawn and padded tiredly out into the main room of the house where bright beams of morning sunlight lit up the rocky floor. Blinking away the sleepiness and blurriness in her gaze, she glanced around at the room and sighed when she realized how empty it was. Padding forward, she peeked into her sister’s room to check on her, then froze and frowned when she realized the room was vacant as well.

“Jash!” she called. “Karenisha’s not in her room!”

Jash looked up from where he stood near his room and padded over with a confused frown. “What do you mean she’s not in her room? She hardly ever moves.”

Cia flicked her tail sharply, her blue eyes narrowing with worry. “Do you see her anywhere?” Her eyes scanned over the empty room and a dark feeling of unease suddenly rose in her chest when her eyes landed on a tiny piece of paper lying on the bed.

“There’s a note,” Jash murmured, following her gaze with uneasy blue eyes.

Taking a deep breath, Cia stepped forward and silently picked up the note. Behind her, Jash moved forward to read over her shoulder. Their eyes widened in shock and horror as they read over the words together. When they had finally finished, the note slipped out of Cia’s paw and fluttered to the ground while she continued to stare lifelessly out at the wall in front of her, her eyes wide with shock and dismay.

“She’s gone,” she whispered, feeling a rush of horror and panic. Her face seemed to have drained of all color. “She’s really gone.”

Jash gaped in shock. “Where could she have gone?”

Cia just shook her head, feeling numb and lifeless. “I...I don’t know. She could have gone anywhere...” She bit her lip and suddenly felt a rush of pain. “Why has this happened to us?” she exclaimed, whirling around to face Jash. “Our entire family has been destroyed. I just don’t understand why this has happened to us.”

Jash took a deep breath and cautiously put his tail around her shoulders, though his eyes were wide with fear and dismay. “I...I don’t know why, Cia...”

Cia took a deep, shaky breath and looked down at her sister’s note, feeling a rush of anguish. She suddenly felt light-headed and weak and swayed on her paws. Her eyes grew wide with hopelessness when she realized there was nothing she could do.

“We’re the only ones left,” she whispered. “Two of us. Two out of the original six that came here.”

Jash wrapped his paw tightly over hers and let out a shaky sigh to try to calm himself down. Their wide, hopeless blue eyes flicked down to the note and they both seemed to wince at the cold, mocking words that stared up at them.

**Dear Cia and Jash,**

**I have lost too much in this horrible forest and there’s too much I have left to lose. I cannot stay in this forest any longer waiting to die. You won’t listen to me, so I have no choice but to leave you behind. I’m leaving the forest and I am never coming back.**

**Love, Karenisha**

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## Secret Weapon

Heat simmered around Saderia and her friends, making their fur feel hot and sticky. Saderia's eyes gleamed brightly in the morning sunlight as she padded across the warm, stinging sand. Two days had passed since the dingo attack and most of their wounds had healed. A few tiny flecks of blood still clung to Saderia's fur and her wounds stung at the touch of sand, but she was able to ignore the pain. Most of Dash and Dingo's wounds had healed up and only a few long, sand-covered scars ran across their bodies. Every now and then, Dingo limped on his injured paw, but whenever she offered to let him rest, he refused. Behind them, Jeb walked with his head down and his eyes locked on his paws. A trace of fear still lit up his green and blue irises.

Saderia looked back to stare at the little creature. "Are you okay, Jeb?"

Jeb blinked and nodded weakly. "I...I guess I'm okay. It was just so scary when those dingoes attacked. I...I thought you guys were going to get really hurt...or killed."

Saderia let out a soft sigh. "But we didn't. We got a few wounds, but they aren't too bad. We're already feeling better and we'll still be fit to fight. We'll protect you."

Jeb let out a soft breath and stared at his paws, feeling a hint of guilt. He was the only one who had walked away from the fight without a single wound. He hated the idea of his new friends getting hurt and it didn't seem fair that he had to depend on them to save him. Trying to ignore the sting of guilt, he just nodded and said nothing.

Saderia gave him a gentle flick of her tail. "You were really brave, too," she said with a smile. "You were the one who scared them off. If you hadn't done that, we would have come out of that a lot worse."

Dingo snorted and rolled his eyes. "I might not have come out of it at all. Rock's not exactly the easiest dingo to take down."

Saderia shivered, feeling her wounds sting with pain. “That’s for sure.”

“Fighting that yellow dingo was hard, too,” Dash sighed. “It was hard to get a hit.”

“Lightning,” Dingo muttered. “The fastest dingo in the pack. He’s not really tough, but he’s pretty useful when it comes to outrunning animals and confusing them.”

“Rip was no walk in the park either,” Saderia said with a roll of her eyes. She frowned when she saw Dingo look down, his eyes suddenly clouded. “Anyway...” she went on, hoping nothing too bad had happened between him and his brother. “It was definitely a good thing that you jumped up when you did, Jeb. You look pretty intimidating to those who have never seen you before.” Her eyes narrowed in thought and a tingle of wonder stirred in her chest. “I think that could really help us.”

Jeb looked up and managed a weak smile, feeling a tingle of hope.

She grinned, then faced Dingo. “Do you know how long we’ve been traveling?”

He frowned and glanced at the sky. “It’s been about seven days since we set out.”

Saderia blinked in surprise. “Seven days? That means we’re close to the forest.”

Dingo grinned and nodded. “We’re definitely close.” He glanced back and flicked her with his tail. “That should make you pretty happy.”

A wide, hopeful smile spread across her face. “It does! I...I almost can’t believe we might be able to see our old forest again soon.”

Dash looked up in surprise. “We’re really close to our old home? That’s great!”

Dingo gave them a warm smile. “It must be great for you two to see your old home again. Maybe we’ll get lucky and those hunters you told me about will be gone.”

Saderia heaved a sigh. “I hope so. Right now, I just want to find my Dad. Seeing my old home *will* be great, though.” A glow of excitement rose in her chest. Memories of her old home in the woods flashed through her mind. Part of her still lingered back in her old home. If the hunters truly had gone, maybe she would finally get that piece back. Excitement shot through



every inch of her body at the thought of seeing her home and she skipped forward eagerly, barely feeling the pain of her wounds.

Grinning widely, she looked up at Dingo. “How far away from it are we?”

A small grin spread across his face. Stopping in place, he angled his ears toward a large sand dune sitting just in front of him and chuckled. “Go and see.”

She frowned in confusion while her friends stopped and looked up at Dingo in befuddlement. Blinking rapidly, she hesitated before slowly brushing past Dingo. She carefully started to climb up the side of the huge sand dune, her tail flicking with wonder and curiosity. Dingo watched her silently and she could feel his eyes on her back. Glancing back, she watched him for a long moment and stumbled over the top of the dune before turning around to face the land in front of her. A gasp escaped her throat.

Lush green trees rose up into the air just a few feet in front of her, towering over the stretch of desert sand. Brilliant green bushes sprung up around the bases of the trees and vines hung from the deep brown branches. Light grass covered the land, meeting with the desert sand. The leaves of the trees seemed to reach out toward her, lit up by the sunlight. A soft rustling noise rose up from the forest, and when she pricked her ears to listen, she could almost hear birdsong echoing between her and her old forest.

A bright, incredulous laugh bubbled out of her chest. Her whole body felt warm with the glow of delight and amazement that seemed to shine in her heart. Her eyes gleamed brightly, seeming to sparkle in the golden rays of sunlight. “It’s home!”

Gasps of surprise and amazement rang out behind her. Turning around, she grinned when she saw Dash stumble toward her and stare out at the forest in shock. His eyes glowed with sudden homesickness and happiness. “We’re back!”

A tiny chuckle sounded from behind him. “And you doubted me.”

Saderia grinned and looked back to see Dingo limp up the side of the dune with a small, knowing smile. Catching her excited gaze, he gave her a wink and a tiny laugh.

Jeb followed close behind him, then froze when he saw the forest rising up out of the sand, spreading out in all directions. His eyes grew wide

with shock and incredulity. Staring out at the bright green forest, he stayed frozen to the spot in awe at such a strange-looking forest. "It's...huge!" he exclaimed. "And it looks so different!"

Dash grinned. "Yeah, I had almost forgotten what a normal forest looks like."

Saderia felt her heart leap with happiness and anticipation. Biting her lip, she hesitated, then lunged down the sand dune. The instant she reached the bottom, she raced toward the huge forest, throwing up clumps of sand behind her and letting the pain in her muscles fade away. Eager calls rang out behind her as Dash and the others chased after her and raced toward the forest, but she didn't bother to look back.

She skidded to a halt on the edge of the forest and beamed when her paws brushed against the soft, cool grass. Trying to hide the glow of happiness, she crept past a lush patch of undergrowth and smiled at the soft, natural green leaves. Padding forward, she pressed her paw up against the rough bark of one of the trees and looked up to see its strong, proud branches radiating out above her. A tiny wind rustled through the trees, and when she strained her ears, she thought she could detect the flutter of a bird's wings.

Closing her eyes, she heaved a long sigh before opening her eyes again to look around. A tiny rustling sound made her turn and grin when she saw Dash venture forward, poking his head around the trees to see into the forest. His eyes gleamed with curiosity and amazement. Looking up, he caught her gaze and gave her a weak smile.

"I miss this place," he murmured. "I even miss my old clearing in the woods."

Saderia let out a soft sigh. "I do, too. But I haven't heard anything strange around here, so maybe the hunters really are gone. We'll have to ask Dad when we find him."

Dash smiled and nodded. "Definitely."

Saderia flicked her tail and grinned. With Dash following close behind her, she stepped out of the cool forest and padded back out into the hot desert. In front of her, Dingo sat back with a satisfied expression, while Jeb stood frozen in amazement. After a long moment of hesitation, the tiny creature stepped toward the edge of the forest to peer past the trees and try

to see into the heart of the lush woods. A shiver of wonder rushed through him. "This forest is so different. It's so big and new, but...it's kind of cool."

He stared up at the towering trees in curiosity. The stories Saderia and Dash had told him of their old home flashed through his mind. He remembered hearing them talk about taking walks through the peaceful forest, exploring the woods, living under their just rulers, seeing all the tiny woods animals, and feeling safe within their own home.

A sense of gloominess washed over him when he thought back to his own forest. Shivers raced down his spine when he thought about the disasters, the sinister atmosphere of the Spring, and the snarky feeling of Zerone's Court. Bitter memories of his forest's defensive and clueless ruler burned in his mind and a tremble of terror raced through him when he thought about the cruel outlaws in the Spring. Fear shivered down his spine when he thought about Secka waiting down in the shadowy caves of the underground.

Looking back up at the forest, he felt a jolt of wonder and amazement. Compared to Saderia's forest, his own home seemed terrifying and miserable. After being out in The Land Beyond the Forest, he realized it wasn't as bad as he had first thought. Danger lurked in the desert, but with his friends by his side, he didn't have to worry. Saderia, Dash, and Dingo were the only friends he had had in a long time and the best friends he had had in his life. Venturing through frightening lands with his friends was much better than living in the Spring with his enemies. If Saderia, Dash, and Dingo went back to the old forest once the journey was over, the last thing he wanted to do was leave behind his only friends.

He glanced around at the forest and felt almost lightheaded when he realized how vast it was. The enormous forest seemed likely to support three more animals. A tingle of hope grew in his chest. "Saderia?" he stammered after a hesitation. "Dash?"

Saderia looked back at him, frowning at his uncertain tone. "Yes?"

Jeb looked down and shuffled his paws in embarrassment. "Um... well, I was wondering...if those hunter creatures really are gone...can I come live here with you?"

Saderia blinked in surprise, then smiled. "Of course! Once this journey is over, we'll introduce you to the forest animals. After that, if your parents are okay with it, you can follow us back to our old home. I'm sure

the forest will get used to you.” Flicking her tail with excitement, she glanced at Dingo and narrowed her eyes. “Speaking of living arrangements, you’re going to come live with us if the hunters are gone, too, right?”

Dingo shrugged and grinned. “I’ll go where you want me to go. Somehow I doubt you’ll actually give me any choice in the matter anyway.”

She grinned and tried to hide a giggle. “Probably not. Once we get back to the forest, I’ll introduce you, too. They might be a little shocked since they still think you’re dead, but I think they’ll get over that. As soon as that’s over, everything will be fine.”

He flicked his tail. “If you say so. Now, let’s see...your Dad should only be about a day or two away from the forest. The question is...where did he start out?”

Saderia frowned and narrowed her eyes. Where exactly *had* her father set out from when he had started his journey to return home? Standing frozen to the spot, she searched the border for any sign of clues as to where he had set out from and felt a tingle of worry when she realized she had no idea where to start. Any hint of paw prints that had been left in the sand had disappeared. Not a clue was left as to which way Makero had gone.

She struggled to think, then froze and blinked in surprise when she felt a sudden cool presence beside her. An echo-like voice whispered in her ear. “Need some help?”

Saderia jumped and whirled around to look behind her, then froze when she saw a familiar light brown dingo standing close behind her. Noticing her stunned expression, Claw grinned and flicked her tail, leaving a light, translucent glow in the air. Saderia’s eyes lit up with hope. “You’re here! Yes, I could definitely use some help!” Dash, Dingo, and Jeb blinked and looked up at her in surprise, but she ignored their baffled stares. “You said you watched him, right? Can you tell me where my Dad started out from?”

Claw glanced at her friends’ confused faces and hid a grin before turning back to Saderia and nodding. “What are friends for? Follow me.” Rising to her paws, the ghostly spirit brushed past her, leading the way along the edge of the border. Turning around, Saderia instantly padded after her and ignored the shocked gazes of her friends.

“Hey, where are you going?” Dash exclaimed, darting after her.

Dingo frowned and followed with narrowed eyes. “Saderia? What’s going on?”

Jeb trailed behind them uncomfortably, his eyes narrowed in uncertainty. “Who’s she talking to?” he whispered, glancing up at his two friends as they followed Saderia.

Dash and Dingo just shook their heads in befuddlement.

Glancing behind her, Saderia tried to hide a giggle and followed close behind Claw. She paused when the spirit stopped at a certain spot on the forest border. The ghost gestured out into the desert. “He started from this exact spot and went that way.”

She grinned. “Thanks.” She paused, then added softly, “Can the others see you?”

Claw shrugged. “I don’t think so. Can they?”

Saderia frowned and narrowed her eyes in thought. “I don’t know. Dash said he could see you earlier. I thought you said that only I could see you, though.”

Claw blinked in surprise then frowned thoughtfully. “Hmm...Well, it *might* be possible that they may start to see me because they hang around with you. Maybe some of your clairvoyance starts to ‘rub off’ on them after a while. I’ve noticed that Dash seems to be able to tell what you’re feeling as much as you can tell what he’s feeling using your powers. Maybe they can start seeing ghosts after being around you for a while.”

She blinked. “So Dash can see you because we’ve been friends the longest?”

“Exactly.” The spirit’s light brown eyes lit up with wonder and excitement. “I hope that’s true! It would be great if my brother could see me!”

Dingo took an uneasy step toward them. “Saderia...who are you talking to?”

Saderia looked back in surprise and felt her face burn with embarrassment. To them, it must look like she was talking to the air. Looking back at Claw, she took a deep breath and managed a weak smile. “Dingo, can you see anything right in front of me?”

Dingo blinked in surprise. After a hesitation, he uncertainly turned to stare at the spot in front of her. “What...is that?” Shock gleamed in his eyes. “Is...is that...”

“That’s a ghost!” Dash leapt to his paws and stared at the spot in front of Saderia. “I can see her! She’s right in front of Saderia and it’s a dingo, too, so it must be...”

“Claw!” Dingo’s eyes widened in shock and he stumbled back in amazement. He stood frozen to the spot, never tearing his eyes away from her hazy presence.

Jeb shivered and looked around wildly, his eyes wide with fear. “G-ghost? What are you talking about?” He trembled and stared intently at the area in front of Saderia, but Saderia doubted he could even see the strange distortion of air surrounding Claw’s spirit.

Saderia smiled at Jeb’s nervous expression, Dash’s stunned look, and the shock glimmering in Dingo’s eyes. “Guys, meet the last member of the prophecy: Claw.”

Dash blinked in surprise before staring intently at the spirit to see her better. Jeb spared a glance at her and shivered in confusion before warily eying the spot where she was supposed to be. Dingo barely seemed to hear her at all. His eyes never once blinked or strayed away from his sister. Their light brown depths shone with hope and wonder.

Giving him a warm smile, Claw slowly stepped forward and flicked him with her tail. After a hesitation, she turned to Saderia. “I don’t think he can hear me. Do me a favor and tell him I’ll be watching him and that maybe someday we can talk to each other.”

Saderia grinned. “No problem. Dingo, Claw just told me to tell you that she’ll be watching over you and that she hopes that someday you’ll be able to speak to each other.”

Dingo blinked and gaped in shock before whirling back around to stare at his sister, as if almost unable to believe she was truly there. Claw smiled and turned to wave experimentally at Dash. Dash hesitated, then cautiously waved back, glancing uneasily around at his friends. The spirit giggled, then stepped forward to hover in front of Jeb. Jeb looked around nervously, seeming to sense something. “Is it near me?” he whimpered.

Claw laughed and smiled. “He’s cute.”

Dingo’s ears pricked as if he could tell his sister was laughing.

“She,” Saderia corrected. “And yes, she’s standing right in front of you.”

Jeb let out a squeak and jumped back to hide behind Dingo. Shaking with fear and unease, he peeked out from behind Dingo's legs. "Ghosts really exist?"

Dash grinned and nodded. "I can see her. She's laughing at you."

Dingo gazed dreamily at his sister's spirit. "Is she?" he murmured. "I thought so."

Claw grinned and cast a warm, friendly glance toward her brother before letting out a sigh. "I should go. Good luck on your journey." A tiny smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. "I'll be watching." Before their eyes, the spirit disappeared into thin air, whisking away in a tiny glow of light before any of them could see what had happened.

Everyone blinked the moment she vanished, as if coming out of a trance. Staring blankly ahead, Dingo seemed frozen in place, his eyes wide and his expression dreamy.

Letting out a tiny whimper, Jeb looked around. "Is it, er, *she* gone?"

Saderia grinned and giggled. "Yes, she disappeared."

Jeb trembled and let out a sigh before shakily stepping out from behind Dingo. He looked up at her with wide eyes. "Are things always this weird with you creatures?"

Dash chuckled. "In a word...yes. Don't worry, Jeb, I don't think ghosts can hurt you, and even if they could, I doubt Claw would want to. Right, Dingo?"

Dingo blinked and nodded, breaking out of his trance. "She wouldn't hurt a fly."

Jeb nodded shakily and tried to control the trembling of his paws. "If you say so."

Dash let out a soft breath. "It looks like it's only noon right now. We can probably cover a lot of ground if we set out now. Saderia, do you know which way we should go?"

Saderia nodded. "Claw told me my Dad started out from here and that he went this way. We probably should get going. Dingo, can you lead the way?"

He nodded absently and stepped forward to take the lead, though his eyes still seemed distant and clouded with amazement. Smiling warmly, Saderia fell into step behind him with Dash and Jeb close behind her. Her

amber eyes gleamed as she started out on the journey and a tiny instinct inside of her burned with hope.

“Hold on, Dad. We’ll find you soon.”

Three days passed by in a blur of heat, walking, and few rest stops. The forest had disappeared behind them hundreds of miles back and countless hours ago. Hunger pangs plagued Saderia with every step, but her eyes gleamed in determination and she forced herself to keep moving, knowing that she was getting closer to her father. The heat barely seemed to affect her anymore. Keeping close to her friends, she kept her eyes open for danger or any hint as to where her father might be. She paused to look around, then froze.

A deafening howl split the air, making them all whirl around just in time to see three dingoes leap out from behind a sand dune. Saderia let out a hiss when Rock lunged forward and stalked toward them, a wide smirk spread across his face. Rip stalked behind him, eying them warily, while another brown dingo crept up behind Rock.

Saderia gritted her teeth and let her fur bristle in alarm. “Not again!”

Dingo let out a growl of fury. “You stalkers! What do you want this time? Don’t you have anything better to do besides attack me?”

Rock snickered and took a threatening step toward him. “I have plenty of things to do as Leader of the desert, but I swore revenge and I’m going to get it.” His eyes glinted, but he barely spared a glance at Dingo before his gaze wandered over to Jeb. A glimmer of unease flashed in his dark brown irises as he stared at the strange creature.

Swallowing back a rush of terror, Jeb took a deep breath and forced himself to step toward the creepy dingoes, hoping to scare them off. The three dingoes took a nervous step backward and kept their eyes locked on him, but they didn’t turn to run.

A growl rumbled in Rock’s throat. “Keep your freak away from us.”

Rip curled his lip. “Where’d you get that thing anyway?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Dingo narrowed his eyes. “Just leave us alone.”

Rock cut his eyes at him. “I don’t think so.” He glanced at Jeb for a long moment before he forced himself to tear his eyes away from him. Glancing back at his comrades, he narrowed his eyes. “Well, it’s not doing anything to us, so...Attack!”



Before Dingo could react, Rock lunged toward him with a furious snarl and shoved him to the ground. Letting out a yelp, Dingo fell backward, but he instantly bared his fangs and dug his claws into Rock's shoulder. Furious snarls echoed around the desert as the two rolled across the sand, digging their claws into each other's shoulders. Shoving Rock away from him with all of his strength, Dingo finally broke free of his grasp and flopped against the ground while Rock rolled to a stop behind them. Both of them leapt to their paws, ignoring the howls and snarls behind them as Rip and the other dingo lunged toward Saderia and Dash. Rock let out a low snarl and stalked toward him.

Behind them, Jeb looked up in horror. His fur rustled when the creepy red dingo lunged toward Saderia with a sharp snarl. Baring their fangs, Saderia and Rip circled each other, bristling and waiting for an attack. Jeb turned at the sound of a low snarl and saw the brown dingo leap toward Dash. The dark brown lion bared his fangs and leapt out of the way just in time to avoid the dingo's slashing claws. Terrified pants shuddered out of Jeb's chest as he stared at the violence. The sickening tang of blood tainted the air and his ears burned with the eruption of screams and snarls. His breath caught when one of the dingoes lashed out at one of his friends and splattered the ground with bright red blood.

A loud, earsplitting snarl forced him to whirl around to see Rock race toward Dingo, a cold, murderous glint in his dark brown eyes. Feeling his heart skip, Jeb leapt forward without thinking and landed in front of Rock before he could reach Dingo. The dusty dingo's eyes widened in alarm and he skidded to a stop. Letting out a yelp of alarm, the dingo Leader leapt away from him and just barely landed on his paws. Looking down in surprise, Dingo grinned, then leapt over Jeb and raced toward Rock to attack.

Whirling around, Jeb gaped in horror when he saw the brown dingo pin Dash against the ground. The dingo leaned down to growl in his face with a sinister sneer, baring his fangs over Dash's neck while the dark lion struggled to push him away. Without thinking, Jeb lunged forward and leapt onto the back of the brown dingo. The dingo's eyes widened in shock and he jerked back with a howl of terror. "Get it off! Get it off!" Bucking wildly, the dingo threw Jeb against the ground before leaping over Dash and racing away as fast as he could, his tail disappearing behind a sand dune.

Smacking Dingo away, Rock let out an infuriated snarl. “Rip,” he growled. “Remind me to exile him for running away during battle without an order.”

Rip grunted in response and stalked closer to Saderia, narrowing his eyes. Snarls erupted behind him when Rock and Dingo leapt toward each other to attack. Ignoring the howls, Rip circled Saderia and bared his fangs, but kept his eyes locked on Jeb.

Trying not to wince, Jeb shakily picked himself up. His heart beat so fast he could barely feel it and his eyes were wide with shock. He had never known he could be so bold. Looking back at Saderia and Rip, he took a deep breath and raced toward the dark red dingo to keep him away from Saderia. He leapt in front of him just before he could lunge toward Saderia’s throat, making Rip jump back with a cry. Terror spread across his face, but he didn’t dare run for fear of being exiled. Trying not to show the alarm in his yellow gaze, he started to circle him, trying to get past him. Trying not to whimper in fear at the sight of his blood-stained claws, Jeb forced himself to keep blocking his way.

A loud howl of pain echoed behind them when Rock stumbled to the ground at a sharp blow from Dingo. Stumbling to his paws, he raked his claws across Dingo’s face, forcing him to stagger back with a groan. Baring his fangs, Rock stalked toward him, then cast a glance around him and suddenly froze in place. His eyes grew wide with alarm.

“Stop!”

His shout rang out just as Rip leapt over Jeb to tower in front of Saderia. Leaning forward and snarling in her face, he froze when he heard Rock’s call and whipped around, his eyes growing wide with shock. He gaped at his Leader in disbelief. “You’ve got to be kidding me! I get past the freak *just* to fight your stupid battle and you tell me to...”

“Shut up!” Rock snarled, narrowing his eyes. “I just realized where we are.”

Rip frowned and looked around with skeptical yellow eyes, then suddenly froze. His eyes grew wide with alarm and he whipped around to stare at Rock in horror.

Rock growled. “We’re too close to those *things* and they might have gotten closer!”

Rip gulped and flattened his ears. “Can we...?”

Rock let out a snarl and whirled around. "Yes, let's get out of here!"

Jeb ducked when Rip leapt over him. Abandoning his fight, Rock bolted away from them with Rip close behind him, their red and dark brown tails streaming out behind them. The two of them leapt to the top of a sand dune and spared one last fleeting glance back at the four of them. A low growl rumbled in Rock's throat and his eyes glinted in fury. "This isn't over!" Giving them one last hateful glare, the dark Leader finally whirled around with Rip close behind him and disappeared behind a wall of light brown sand.

The four of them stared after them with wide, stunned eyes and blinked in shock when they had finally vanished. A frown spread across Saderia's face and she slowly padded toward her friends. Ignoring the tiny sting of her wounds, she glanced around at her friends and narrowed her eyes. "What was *that* all about?"

Dash frowned, his eyes narrowed in befuddlement. "I don't know. Too close to what things? What were they so afraid of?"

Saderia shivered. "It's not the Snake Pit, is it?"

Dingo shook his head distractedly. "No, the Snake Pit is miles from here." He shook his head uncomprehendingly. "I have no idea what they were talking about, but dingoes never abandon a fight. What would make them flee from a battle like that?"

"Something strange and creepy," Dash muttered. "But I don't know what it is."

Saderia took a deep breath, feeling a shiver race up her spine. "I think I have an idea. Come on, let's keep moving. Dingo, you lead the way. We're getting closer."

Dingo frowned before slowly turning around and starting forward. Ignoring the wounds they had received in their fight, Saderia and Dash padded close behind him while Jeb cautiously followed them, trying to calm the frantic pounding of his heart. Letting her breath return to normal, Saderia tried not to notice Dingo's slight limp and the blood staining his face and sides. Of the four of them, he had come out of the battle the worst. Seeming not to notice the wounds, Dingo led the way, his eyes narrowed with curiosity.

Saderia raced over the huge sand dunes, leaping up them and sliding down again as if caught in an endless cycle of waves. Taking a deep breath,

she ran ahead of Dingo. Her heart skipped and a dark instinct screamed warnings at her with every step. Gritting her teeth, she crept to the top of a large sand dune in front of her, then froze in shock.

Dozens of triangular brown tarps spread out in front of her in a rough circle, hidden from sight by the huge, surrounding dunes. Some of the fabric on the tarps hung open while others were zipped up tight. Strange supplies littered the ground in the center of the eerie camp. A few small brown crates had been piled up next to the tarps. Knives and other tools had been thrown haphazardly across the camp. A few paces away from the tarps sat terrifying, monstrous-looking creatures. Pitch black metal contraptions sat on top of four dirt-stained black wheels, gleaming in the burning sunlight.

Saderia felt her heart stop and heard tiny gasps echo around her when her three friends crept up behind her. A tiny zipping noise suddenly broke the silence of the desert air around them, making her whip around and gape in shock when the sides of one of the tarps fell away to reveal a hairless creature dressed in brown and green fabric.

“A human,” she whispered.

Dash let out a tiny gasp while Dingo narrowed his eyes in understanding. A low growl rumbled in the canine’s throat. “So this is what Rock meant.”

Jeb blinked and stared at the strange creature in surprise as it crept out of the tarp and stood up on two legs. Around the camp, other creatures crawled out from underneath the tarps and stalked toward the center of the camp. “Humans? Are they dangerous?”

“Yes, they are.” Saderia’s eyes darkened as she watched the humans dig around in their piles of tools. “They might be the most dangerous creatures in the world.”

Jeb’s eyes widened in alarm and he felt his heart start to beat faster with fear.

Saderia scanned the camp and felt her heart skip in her chest when she saw one of the humans say something, laugh, then pull an eerily familiar black contraption out of a hole on the side of the fabric covering its body. A gun.

Dingo frowned and narrowed his eyes. “What’s that?”

“A gun,” Dash murmured. “If they see us, they can kill us with it from far away.”

Jeb gaped in horror, his heart pounding rapidly in his chest. Ignoring an instinctual pang of terror, Saderia peered closely at the weapon, feeling a tingle of wonder when she realized it looked slightly different. She watched closely as more humans crept out from underneath the tarps. Her ears pricked when one of the humans let out a laugh and called something in a foreign language, then she growled in frustration when she realized she had no hope of understanding. “Can anyone understand what they’re saying?”

Jeb blinked in surprise. “I can. Can’t the rest of you?”

Saderia’s eyes widened while Dash and Dingo turned to stare at him with narrowed, curious amber and light brown eyes. “No...” Dash frowned in confusion. “I can’t understand anything. It sounds like gibberish. How can you understand it?”

Jeb blinked in shock and tipped his head in confusion. “I...I don’t know.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes as her Dream whisked through her mind. Her heart skipped and a sudden jolt of surprise and realization shot through her. In the Dream, she had seen the camp the humans had set up and the animals they had trapped in cages for their experiments. A shiver of alarm slithered down her spine when she remembered seeing the human trip and spill the chemicals, causing the entire camp to erupt in a huge explosion. The overwhelming eruption had radiated out from the center of camp and spread out in all directions, capturing the caged animals...but not sparing the humans.

Her eyes lit up with understanding. “The humans that were in that camp during the explosion that formed Jeb’s forest never made it out alive. They must have been mutated along with the animals. Kraguers are the result of all those animals mixing in the explosion and humans were in it, too. Jeb’s got human DNA. That’s why he can understand!”

The three of them gaped in shock, but she ignored their stunned looks. Her mind whirled as she thought back to her Dream. Her instincts had been leading her to the camp all along... Wondering why they had been led there, she looked up, then froze in horror as the final piece fell into place. A deafening roar rose up from one of the human dens, echoing

around the desert. Her three friends whipped around to stare at the den in shock.

Dash's eyes widened in horror. "That's..."

"Dad's roar," Saderia finished, going numb with horror and understanding.

Dingo gaped at them in dismay. "Those *things* have your father?"

Saderia nodded weakly, feeling her heart skip. Looking up, she stared out at the humans with wide, helpless eyes, wondering what she could possibly do. Her claws dug deep into the sand. "Jeb," she hissed, eyeing the humans. "Tell me what they're saying."

Jeb hesitated, then slowly leaned forward. "The one human in front of that one with the gun said, 'Put that thing away. You could hurt someone.' The other human holding the gun said, 'Relax. It's just a tranquilizer gun.'"

Saderia frowned in confusion. "What's a tranquilizer gun?"

Dash blinked, his eyes lighting up with a sudden memory. "Didn't Maeta say something like that?" He paused for a long moment, then looked up with bright eyes. "Oh, yeah. When I was in the sick fortress, she used these herbs called tranquilizer herbs to calm down the animals who were panicking. They always fell asleep when she used it and then woke up a few hours later. So could these guns somehow be like that?"

Saderia frowned. "Maybe these guns only put animals to sleep." She narrowed her eyes, then blinked in surprise when she remembered hearing her mother tell her about her eerie Dream. Memories of her own Dream and the horrible vision of her father stumbling to the ground after being shot flashed through her mind. Neither she nor her mother had been able to tell if he had been killed by the shot. The humans must have simply put him to sleep with the tranquilizer gun and then brought him back to their camp. The roar she had heard proved he was alive. Her heart skipped with hope. If she was right, the humans' gun wouldn't kill them, but if it could put them to sleep, it was still dangerous.

"Saderia?" She blinked out of her trance at the sound of Jeb's voice and turned to see the tiny creature staring up at her uneasily. "Should I keep translating?"

She nodded rapidly. "Yes. Definitely."

The human with the gun shrugged. “Besides, I need this gun. What if something attacks? You never know what we’ll find. We found a tiger, didn’t we?”

The other human chuckled. “A tiger in the desert. I sure didn’t expect that.”

Another human grinned. “We’re lucky. We’ll make a fortune selling it to a zoo.”

Saderia frowned. “What’s a zoo?” When she glanced around at her friends, the three of them shook their heads in confusion. This time, no one had any idea.

Another human padded over to the others and tapped them on the shoulder. “Come on, get back to your tents and pack up your stuff. We’re leaving tomorrow.”

Saderia gritted her teeth in determination when Jeb had finished translating. Her father was hidden inside one of the dens and she wasn’t going to let them take him away. Creeping closer, she watched as the humans slipped into their dens. Her eyes narrowed when all of the humans had vanished under the tarps and her heart pounded with a sudden crazy urge. Without giving herself time to think, she leapt over the top of the dune and raced forward, skidding to a halt just behind one of the human dens.

Dash let out a cry of shock behind her. “Saderia, wait!”

Ignoring his cry, she crouched down and peeked out around the tent. Her heart pounded frantically and her eyes narrowed as she scanned the vacant clearing. Creeping closer, she froze when something brushed her fur and jumped at the sound of a soft hiss.

“Are you *insane*?”

She whirled around and gaped in shock when she saw Dash crouch down in front of her, glaring at her with narrowed amber eyes. “What are you doing here?”

Dash lashed his tail in annoyance. “Did you think I was going to let you go down here alone? What’s wrong with you anyway? You can’t just run out into a human camp!”

She narrowed her eyes. “I’m sorry, but I have to help Dad, whatever it takes.”

“Well, count us in.”

Her eyes widened when she saw Dingo race over to them with Jeb close behind him. She flattened her ears when they crouched down beside her. "This is dangerous!"

Dash shrugged. "Everything we do is dangerous. We're here, so let's go for it."

Dingo flicked his tail. "He's right, you know. You only live once."

Saderia let out a reluctant sigh. "All right. Fine." Casting a glance back out into the camp, she murmured, "I heard that roar come from the den just across from this one. Right now, no one's around, so we might be able to just run over there and unzip it."

Dash narrowed his eyes. "What if there are humans?"

Saderia took a deep breath. "We'll have to risk it. There's no sense waiting here to see if someone comes out. If Dad's in there, I don't want a human around him anyway."

Dash let out a long sigh. "All right. Whenever you're ready."

Saderia nodded slowly and looked around at the human camp, her heart pounding rapidly. The camp was empty, but how long would it be before a human slipped out of a den and spotted them? The distance between herself and the den on the opposite side of the camp suddenly seemed too large. What if she got caught in the center of the camp?

Dingo pressed closer to her and growled in her ear. "It's now or never."

She took a deep breath and braced herself. "Now." Narrowing her eyes, she leapt forward and raced across the camp with her three friends behind her. Her fur prickled with fear when she darted through the center of the camp. Feeling almost light-headed, she lunged past a few creates and skidded to a halt in front of the human den, fumbling desperately with the zipper. Her heart pounded faster when she realized how easy it would be for a human to walk out and discover her. Relief shot up her spine when she finally yanked down the zipper. Turning back, she instantly pushed Jeb inside. Before she could usher the others in, Dash pushed her into the tent. Exchanging a quick glance with Dingo, Dash ducked inside while Dingo leapt in behind him. Turning around, he instantly zipped up the den again to hide them from the hunters.

Saderia let out a shaky breath of relief, then froze when she turned to look into the den. An enormous cage with long, cold bars towered in



front of them, touching the top of the tent. Laying trapped inside with his paws splayed out in all directions was Makero.

Saderia stared at Makero's dirty, tattered orange fur in shock. Dash hovered close beside her, gazing at his adopted father with stunned amber eyes, while Dingo and Jeb hovered close by the entrance, hidden behind Saderia and Dash.

"Dad!" Saderia whispered, pressing up against the cage. "Dad, it's us!"

Makero's ears twitched and he slowly raised his head. His dull green eyes instantly widened and lit up with shock when he saw Saderia and Dash. Suppressing a groan of pain, he staggered to his paws and stumbled over to the bars, looking back and forth in disbelief. "Saderia?" he choked out. "Dash?" He gaped in incredulity, as if unable to believe what he was seeing. "I...I thought I would never see you again!" His eyes lit up with joy and he opened his mouth to say something else, then froze when a shadow of horror swept across his face. Leaning closer, he dropped his voice to a low growl. "What are you doing here? Don't you know you're in danger? There are humans out there!"

Saderia nodded. "We know, but it's okay. We're going to get you out of here."

"Saderia..." He stared at her with wide, pleading eyes. "You don't understand. Those things have guns. They're not like the ones we saw in our old forest, but they can still put you to sleep. They'll capture you, too, and lock you up in a cage just like me."

Dash lashed his tail. "We're not leaving you. I don't care what we have to do."

Makero gritted his teeth in frustration. "How did you even get here?"

"We went through the desert looking for you," Saderia muttered distractedly, scanning the den for anything that could free him. "But that doesn't matter..."

"You traveled the desert and actually found me?" Makero gaped in incredulity. "And you didn't get lost? How did you do that?"

Dingo looked up from where he stood hidden behind Saderia and slowly stepped forward to stand where Makero could see him, meeting his gaze. "I led them."

Makero blinked in surprise. "You...you look familiar. But...you can't be..."

Dingo dipped his head. "I'm Dingo, King Makero. I believe we met once before."

Makero gaped in shock. "Am I hallucinating? Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

Dingo sighed. "Yes, but I'm not. It's a long story, but this is real and I'm alive."

While Makero gazed at him in shock, Saderia hissed in frustration when she realized the den was empty of anything she could use to break him out. Flicking her tail worriedly, she crouched down in front of the entrance to peer out into the human camp. The moment she moved out of sight, Makero gasped in shock. Following his gaze, she realized she had moved out of the way just enough to reveal Jeb.

The King gaped at the tiny creature in amazement. "*What is that?*"

Jeb froze and stared up at him with wide, frightened eyes, but Dash gave him a reassuring flick of his tail. "Makero," he murmured, "this is Jeb. I know he looks weird, but you get used to it after a while. We met him in the new forest while you were gone."

"He's part of the prophecy," Saderia added, staring uneasily at the human camp.

Jeb trembled uncertainly. "Um, hi, er, sir," he stammered.

"Hi," Makero replied, his voice stunned. He blinked several times. After a long moment, he shook himself and took a deep breath. "I've seen it all now."

Saderia lashed her tail and looked around wildly. "We don't have time for this. Dad, do you know where the key to your cage is?"

Makero frowned. "I think it's in one of the other human dens, but I don't think you should...Saderia, wait!"

Ignoring his cries, Saderia stalked over to the entrance of the tent and yanked the zipper down. Before anyone could protest, she leapt out into the human camp and zipped it back up behind her, hiding the others from view. Feeling her fur prickle at the sight of the empty camp, she looked around wildly for any sign to show her where the key would be. Shivers raced down her spine when she glanced at the eerie tents that separated her from the humans with only a few inches of soft fabric. Shaking away the

fear racing down her spine, she gritted her teeth and forced herself to squeeze her eyes shut and think.

“Key,” she muttered. “Come on, where’s the key?”

Pushing away the terror and the stress of knowing her father was depending on her, she struggled to find the key. Taking a deep breath, she let her Dream sense take over and cast her consciousness out around her, searching the tents for the key. After a moment that seemed to last a lifetime, she felt a strong tug from inside one of the nearby dens.

Her eyes flew open and she whirled around to stare at one of the closest dens, feeling her instinct urging her forward. Gritting her teeth, she darted forward, throwing up tiny clouds of dust and sand behind her before skidding to a halt in front of the tan tent. She yanked down the zipper before poking her head inside the tiny den. Her eyes lit up when she spotted a tiny silver key lying on top of a tiny brown crate in front of stacks of boxes. Lunging forward, she grabbed the key and darted out into the center of the camp.

Fearful pants shuddered out of her chest as she looked around. Her heart lifted with hope when she faced the den her friends were hiding in. Clutching the key, she raced toward the tent and yanked down the zipper. She started to duck inside, then froze halfway through when she heard a sharp, stunned gasp ring out behind her. Stumbling into the den and whirling around, she had just enough time to see a human standing a few feet away from the tent before Dash and Dingo yanked the zipper back up and hid him from view.

Alarm lit up their amber and light brown eyes as they whirled around to stare at her. Beside them, Jeb gaped at her in horror. “One of those things saw you!”

Feeling her heart skip with fear and her mind whirl with alarm, Saderia struggled to push away her panic and stumbled over to Makero’s cage. Ignoring the terrified gazes of her friends, she jammed the key into the lock and tore open the door to the cage. A glimmer of hope shone in the King’s eyes, but the glow was smothered by fear.

Saderia whirled around to see Dash crouching close by the entrance of the den. His tail flicked anxiously back and forth as he peered out through a hole in the tent. “There’s a whole bunch of them outside. They’ve

all got guns pointed directly at us.” He slowly looked up, his face twisted with terror. “They’re waiting for us to come out.”

Jeb gaped in horror, his eyes wide with dismay. “What do we do? Just stay here?”

Dingo narrowed his eyes. “No. They know we’ve got to come out sometime.”

Makero’s gaze darkened as he padded up to stand beside them, no longer noticing or caring about Dingo and Jeb’s strange, unexplained presence. His tail twitched nervously back and forth and his eyes narrowed in thought. He gazed around at the four of them, studying their expressions and trying desperately to think of a solution.

Saderia lashed her tail fiercely back and forth, furious at herself for letting a hunter catch sight of her. Her heart burned with anger and fear when she realized she couldn’t come up with a solution. Whenever she tried to think of a way to get her friends out of danger, she came up with a blank. Her heart beat so fast she could barely feel a thing. Gruff shouts sounded from outside and she shivered when she heard footsteps pounding against the ground, meaning more humans had gathered outside the den.

Terror seemed to hang in the air, growing stronger and stronger by the minute. Surrounded by the hot fabric of the tent and enclosed in the sweaty cloth prison with a cage behind her and humans waiting in front of her with guns, there didn’t seem to be any way out. No solution popped into her mind. It seemed as if all of them were doomed.

Saderia glanced around at her friends, desperately trying to think of a way to save them, then froze when her gaze landed on Jeb. A jolt of shock raced through her when she remembered how stunned and alarmed she had felt when she had first laid eyes on Jeb. A glimmer of hope burned in her chest when she remembered how terrified the dingoes had been when they had first seen Jeb. The instant he had shown himself, the most threatening dingoes in the pack had turned tail and run for their lives. Desperate, reckless thoughts swirled through her mind and a risky plan began to form.

She took a deep breath and raised her head to look around at her friends and father. “All right, I have a plan.” The four of them turned to her with wide, desperate eyes. “Jeb,” she murmured, trying to hide her uncertainty. “Do you remember how you scared off the dingoes? Because of

your strange appearance, everyone seems to be afraid of you. I think the humans might react the same way.”

Jeb blinked and stared at her in horror. “You...you want me to go out there?”

“Yes,” she said, meeting his gaze with burning amber eyes. “I know it’s scary, but it’s our only hope. If we get lucky, you might be able to scare the humans into running away. If not, I think you’ll be able to scare them enough to stun them. That will give us a chance to jump out and attack. If we all jump out to attack now, we’ll all be shot. If you surprise them enough that they’re stunned for just a moment, that will give us a chance to jump out and attack before they can recover from their surprise and pull the trigger.”

Jeb shook his head frantically. “I can’t do that,” he choked out. “I just can’t...”

“You have to,” she pleaded. “There’s no other way. The humans will wait for us all day until they get sick of waiting and either shoot at the tent or come in to get us.”

“Either way, we’re going to have to fight our way out,” Dingo muttered. “If Jeb surprises them enough to stun them, that will give us the advantage.”

Dash frowned uncertainly. “It’s a good idea, but then again, what if the humans aren’t surprised by Jeb? After all, they *are* the ones who created his kind...”

“Yes, but they don’t know anything about it,” Saderia replied, her tail flicking anxiously. “None of the humans survived the explosion to go home and tell about it. As far as the humans know, kraguers don’t exist. Besides, even if this doesn’t work, we won’t die if they shoot us. We’ll fall asleep and we might get locked up, but as long as we’re alive, we might be able to find some other way out. I think it’s worth the risk.”

Dash nodded thoughtfully. “There *are* five of us. It could work.”

Each of them turned to gaze at Jeb with hopeful, pleading expressions.

Jeb stared back at them in horror. “I...I can’t...” he choked out. “I... I just...”

Dingo watched him closely, then turned to Saderia with dark, resigned brown eyes. “If it’s a sacrifice you’re looking for, I’ll go in Jeb’s

place.”

Saderia flicked her tail uncomfortably. “I’m not looking for a sacrifice. I’m sure the hunters have seen dingoes by now, so you probably won’t stun them at all. If you jump out there, you’ll get shot and we won’t have their surprise as our advantage. If Jeb jumps out there, it will stun them enough to give us an advantage and most likely make them pause just long enough for us to jump out and save him from getting shot.”

Dingo sighed. “I understand. He just seems so afraid. I don’t know if he’ll do it.”

Saderia bit her lip and turned to Jeb with wide, pleading eyes. “Please, Jeb. This is the only thing that can save us.”

Jeb shivered in horror, his blood turning to ice. His mind whirled with fear. Why had he come on this journey? Why hadn’t he known that any step out of his forest was a step into danger? His heart pounded rapidly and a wave of terror swept over him when he turned to face the entrance. Death or terrible disaster waited for him outside. His whole body felt petrified with fear and he could barely force himself to breathe. The thought of moving two steps seemed impossible, much less jumping out into a camp full of dangerous creatures aiming weapons at him. He just couldn’t do it.

His eyes widened with desperation and fear. He wanted to help, but he couldn’t risk his life. Wasn’t that asking too much? Even as the desperate thoughts swirled through his mind, he couldn’t help but feel a pang of guilt. Memories of the painful wounds his friends had received flashed through his mind and he winced when he remembered hearing Saderia whisper to him to run when the fight with the dingoes started. He remembered seeing Saderia, Dash, and Dingo fighting bravely to protect themselves and him from danger. Shock burned in his chest when he remembered seeing the eerie dark brown canine pin Dingo down and lean toward his throat. All three of them had risked their lives to protect him and each other. Why couldn’t he return the favor?

His paws itched with the longing to save them the same way they had saved him, but the idea sent shivers down his spine. Looking at his friends, he felt a sharp jolt of guilt when he saw the desperation in their eyes. When he turned to look at Saderia, he saw only kindness and worry in her eyes.

Meeting his gaze, she hesitated, then let out a long sigh. "I shouldn't ask you to do this. It's too dangerous for anyone."

Jeb stared at her with wide eyes. Somehow he knew that if she was in his place, she would have already jumped out there to save her friends. Dingo, the one animal in Saderia's group of friends he knew the least, had offered to take his place and let himself be shot to save his friends. From the worry gleaming in Dash's eyes, Jeb could tell that he would do it, too, to save Saderia. Why couldn't he be brave like them? Their only hope laid with him and he couldn't even get up the courage to help them. He looked up into their terrified faces and realized that they were just as afraid as he was, only they had each made it their duty to find a new solution. Why couldn't he make it easier for them?

He took a deep, shaky breath, trying to calm the violent beating of his heart. "Wait," he stammered, making them look up at him in surprise. "I...I'll do it."

Saderia blinked in surprise. "You will? That...that's great! Thank you, Jeb. We'll do everything we can to protect you." After giving him a grateful smile, she turned to face the others and narrowed her eyes in seriousness. "All right, right after Jeb jumps and stuns the humans, we'll leap out and attack them. Our first goal is to get those guns away from them. Without their weapons, they'll be much easier to drive off. Understand?"

The three of them nodded, their eyes narrowing and darkening with determination.

Taking a deep breath, Saderia turned around and rested her tail comfortably on Jeb's shoulder, meeting his gaze with kind, reassuring amber eyes. "Don't worry, Jeb. I promise we'll be right after you. We'll do everything we can to protect you."

Jeb tried to smile, but the smile seemed more like a grimace. Taking a deep, shaky breath, he slowly turned to face the entrance, feeling a wave of dread wash over him. His paws felt numb with fear and his legs trembled underneath him. Gritting his teeth, he shrank away from the entrance, trying to calm the wild pounding of his heart. Cold sweat dripped down his face when Dingo stepped forward to stand beside the entrance.

"Whenever you're ready," he murmured, putting a paw on the zipper.

Jeb let out a long, shaky breath and tried to relax. Pushing back the cold fear, he narrowed his eyes and dug his claws deep into the sand underneath him. Lashing his tail, he forced himself to stop himself from shaking. Taking a deep breath, he faced the entrance of the tent. His blue and green eyes gleamed with determination and before he could stop to think about what he was doing, he let out a soft growl. "Open it."

Light poured in from outside when Dingo yanked down the zipper, blinding him with a flash of yellow light. Not stopping to try to see, Jeb forced himself to leap out of the tent. He landed roughly a few feet in front of the tent, shielding the others from view. The blinding light of the sun faded away as gasps of shock and alarm rose up around him, and when the shining yellow gleam of sunlight finally died away, Jeb looked up and froze in terror. His heart stopped.

Dozens of humans stood in front of him, staring at him with wide, stunned eyes and mouths gaping in shock. A few of them dropped their pitch black weapons and gazed at him in horror and disbelief. Each one of them seemed frozen, stunned, and unable to move. Their incredulous eyes bored into him, setting his fur on fire with terror. Jeb's head whirled with dizziness and he felt as if he was going to faint. Where were the others?

A deafening snarl suddenly erupted from inside the den, making Jeb whip around in shock. The humans looked up in surprise and followed his gaze just as Saderia burst out from within the den. Low growls and earsplitting howls echoed in the air as Dash, Dingo, and Makero lunged out of the den after her and leapt toward the humans. Terror spread across the humans' faces and screams erupted throughout the clearing.

Saderia lunged toward one of the closest humans with a furious snarl, sending the gun flying out of his hand. Growls rang out around her as her friends leapt toward the humans. Guns clattered to the ground and feet pounded the sand as humans raced away from them. A loud growling noise rose in the air when a few of the humans raced toward the monstrous contraptions on the edge of the camp and leapt inside them. Closing the humans in, the strange contraption raced away with the humans trapped inside of them.

Baring her fangs, Saderia leaned forward and snarled in the human's face as he struggled underneath her, letting out terrified cries and staring up at her with wide, horrified eyes. Letting out one final, warning snarl, she



reluctantly tore herself away from the human and let him up. The instant she moved away from him, the human leapt to his feet and raced toward the strange contraptions, screaming and shouting as he ran.

Whirling around, Saderia stared out at the human camp and narrowed her eyes at the wild flurry of movement. Humans raced madly throughout the clearing, reaching for weapons and letting out a cry when one of her friends knocked it out of their hands and threw them to the ground. Dash, Dingo, and Makero charged through the camp, swiping their claws at any of the weapons to send them sailing away through the air and lunging at any human brave enough to face them. Baring his fangs, Dingo stalked toward one of the humans with a dangerous snarl until it turned and fled. Behind him, Dash knocked one of them to the ground, letting him up when he let out a terrified scream. A furious roar rose up around the camp when Makero charged toward a group of humans and chased them toward the metal contraptions, his eyes gleaming with fury. Ignoring the frightened shrieks of the humans as they struggled to outrun the King, Saderia lunged forward to join the fray and searched for a human holding a weapon. Her ears pricked and she froze when she heard the soft thud of footsteps behind her.

Whirling around, she let out a gasp of fear and felt her eyes widen in horror. A human towered in front of her, sneering down at her with a cocky smirk and chuckling to itself. His gun was aimed right between her eyes. Terror washed over her, freezing her in place. Her heart stopped when the human slowly put his hand over the trigger, but before she could move, an earsplitting roar erupted behind her.

***“Get away from her!”***

The human looked up in surprise, then let out a shriek when Dash suddenly lunged over Saderia and slammed the human against the ground. The human’s weapon went flying in the other direction, slamming into a stack of crates and sending them tumbling to the ground. A low growl rumbled in Dash’s throat as he pushed the human into the sand, keeping him pinned down. His eyes narrowed and blazed with fury as he leaned closer to the human’s terrified face. Screams wrenched out of the human’s throat as he struggled to push the bristling lion away.

Blinking in surprise, Saderia shook off the terror that had frozen her in place and staggered over to stare down at the human. The terrified

creature struggled desperately when she crept up beside Dash. Narrowing her eyes, Saderia watched him for a long moment before pressing her paw against Dash's shoulder. "Dash, let him up."

He narrowed his flaming amber eyes and gritted his teeth. "He tried to kill you."

"He's no threat now," she said sternly, ignoring the human's cries. "Let him go."

Dash glanced down at the human and let out a low, threatening snarl before reluctantly letting him up. The human jumped away from him and staggered away as fast as he could, stumbling across the ground and letting out cries of terror. Tearing his gaze off the human, Dash looked at her in concern and the savage snarl in his voice faded into a worried tone. "Are you okay?"

She gave him a weak smile. "I'm fine. Thank you, Dash." Stepping back and not noticing the howls and shouts screaming against her aching ears, she looked at her best friend and frowned. Blood seeped out from a deep gash across his face, staining his dark brown fur red. Several other cuts covered his sides. She narrowed her eyes uneasily and pressed her paw against the nasty wound. "What happened? Are you okay?"

Dash shrugged and pushed her paw away with a weak smile. "I'm fine. A few had a knife, but I got it away from them." His eyes gleamed. "Come on, let's help the others."

After giving him a worried gaze, Saderia whirled around and stared out at the wild clearing. Only a few humans remained and only a few of the strange contraptions hadn't left to carry other humans away. The rest of the humans ran desperately while a few lingered to fight. Dingo raced after the humans, snarling and snapping at their legs. His light brown eyes gleamed with determination to save his friends and drive them away. On the other side of the clearing, Makero lunged toward a group of humans and sent them running away as fast as they could. Their cries rose in the air as the King's eyes blazed with anger. The human's pitch black weapons littered the ground and broken crates and boxes were strewn out across the sand. Looking around, Saderia scanned the almost empty camp and stopped when her eyes locked on the tent she had come from.

Standing frozen in front of the human den was Jeb. The tiny creature's eyes were wide with terror as he gazed out at the wild battle, but

behind the fear, she could sense a tiny glimmer of pride. He never blinked, seeming frozen in shock and amazement. Saderia's eyes glowed with gratitude and pride that Jeb had been brave enough to save them. If his strange appearance hadn't caused the hunters to freeze for that one tiny moment, she knew her friends would be in cages instead of free to fight in the battle.

Her eyes gleamed in determination and she whirled around to scan the clearing. Locking her gaze on a group of humans standing in the center of the camp, she let out a low snarl and lunged toward them with Dash close beside her. The humans whirled around at the sound of her growl and turned to run, letting out shrieks of fear. Chasing them away, she and Dash ran side by side and forced them to stumble desperately toward the last contraption remaining on the sand. The roar of the strange metal creature filled the air when the humans jumped inside, and she and Dash loped to a shaky stop when it raced away from them, leaving a cloud of smoke behind it.

Whirling around, she looked back and paused when she realized the human camp was abandoned. Dingo trotted into the center of the camp, looking around and letting his tongue loll out of the side of his mouth with tiredness. Makero raced behind him and skidded to a halt just beside the canine, looking around wildly and letting the fire die from his green gaze when he realized there were no humans left. Heavy pants shuddered out of Saderia's chest, but when she looked around and realized the clearing was truly empty, a glow of triumph shone in her heart. Stumbling toward her friends, she let out a shaky gasp, realizing it was over. All of the humans had fled. She and her friends had won.

Biting back a cry of relief, she looked around at her friends. A few bloody knife wounds covered Dingo's body and a deep gash ran across Makero's side, but neither of them seemed to notice. A glow of hope burned in her chest. "Is everyone okay?"

Dingo grinned and nodded. "We're fine." He glanced around the clearing and flicked his tail. "I think that's the last of them."

Jeb looked around at the four of them and shakily took a step toward them. "It...it is," he choked out, gazing around at them in awe and incredulity. Blinking rapidly, he tried to calm the frantic beating of his heart. "I...I heard one of them say something."

Saderia rested her tail comfortably on his shoulder, giving him a reassuring smile when he faced her with wide eyes. “What was it?”

He glanced at the place where the humans had left in their strange contraptions and frowned. “When they got in their cars—that’s what they called those big metal things—I heard one of them say something. They said...they were never coming back. They said this place was strange and that they were never coming back to the desert...or the forest.”

Saderia’s eyes widened. “You...you mean our forest?”

He blinked and stared up at her with wide, wondering eyes. “I think so.”

Dash gaped at him in shock and everybody fell silent, staring at Jeb in incredulity. A hopeful, triumphant smile spread across Saderia’s face when she realized that the battle had been won. A glow of warmth spread to every inch of her body and she closed her eyes and threw back her head, letting out a shout of relief. “The humans are gone! The battle is over!” Her eyes opened wide and gleamed with joy. “The old forest is ours!”

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

## Homecoming

Days passed by as Saderia and her friends traveled back to Jeb's forest. The heat from the broiling sun simmered down on them, making waves of heat rise off the sand dunes and wash over them. Saderia's fur had grown thin and bristly, but she still felt sticky with sweat after endless hours of walking and only a few minutes of breaks. The food stored in their packs had started to run out and her stomach growled with hunger, but even with the exhaustion and hunger pangs, her eyes gleamed with excitement.

Dash, Dingo, Jeb, and Makero padded tiredly alongside her. Their eyes gleamed in the bright, blinding sunlight, but she could still detect their exhaustion. A glimmer of fear still haunted Jeb's blue and green gaze, but it was overshadowed by the gleam of pride. For the first few days, the memories of the fight had terrified him, but after enough time had passed, he had overcome his terror and realized how much he had helped them.

The wounds they had received in the battle with the humans and the injuries Saderia and her friends had gotten in the fight with the dingoes had healed and closed up. Only a few tiny drops of blood clung to their fur. All of them ignored the exhaustion and the twinge of pain in the hopes of getting back to the forest.

In the six and a half days that passed by, Makero told them how he had been captured. After traveling for a week through the desert, he had stumbled onto their old forest. Thankfully, he hadn't had any run-ins with the dingoes. Makero had instantly gone into their old forest to explore. Days had passed by as he explored every inch of the forest, searching for any sign of the hunters. Bullet-scarred trees, abandoned weapons, and old tools had been left behind, but no matter where he looked, he couldn't find any sign of humans. All of them had left after the forest animals had abandoned their home.

Unfortunately, when Makero had realized the hunters were gone, he hadn't realized that they had moved to the desert. He had rushed through

the desert as fast as he could, eager to get home, and wasn't as careful as he should have been. A few days had passed by without danger, but eventually he had stumbled into the sight of the humans. When he saw them, he had instantly turned to run away, but the humans had already spotted him. They had chased after him with their weapons, and when they got close enough, they had shot him with the tranquilizer gun. Makero told them he couldn't remember seeing anything but darkness and he couldn't recall anything that had happened afterwards. It could have been hours or days before he finally woke up enclosed in the metal cage in the human's tent, clueless as to what to do and desperate to escape.

His story explained both Saderia and Karenisha's eerie Dreams. Saderia felt her heart glow with relief when she realized she had been right in saying that seeing Makero unconscious didn't mean he was dead. Her paws itched with the desire to get home faster to tell her mother. Maybe if Karenisha knew the truth, she would return to normal.

Throughout the days, Dingo had explained to Makero exactly how it was possible that he was alive. After Dingo had finished his story, Saderia explained everything that had happened after Makero had left the forest. Worry and unease crept up her spine when she told him about Karenisha's Dream and how dull and lifeless the Queen had become when she thought he was dead. The King's eyes narrowed with pain and sympathy at the grim news and he had simply nodded, hoping that his return would make her senses come back. Continuing on with her story, Saderia winced when she described how Dash had fallen deathly ill. Makero's eyes widened with shock when she told him how close Dash had been to dying in his absence. Trying not to linger on the painful topic, she explained how she had finally forced herself to believe in her Dream sense again to save Dash and raced out of the house to find the fruit and the strange, curative herb.

Jeb had looked surprised when she described the odd plant. When she had finished detailing what it looked like, he had blurted out that the plant only grew once a year for exactly one week only. Suppressing a look of surprise, Saderia had simply nodded and tried to hide a shiver when she imagined what might have happened if she had been too late to find the plant. Trying to shake off her unease, she told her father how she had discovered the Spring and later gone back to explore it.

When Makero had looked at Jeb, his expression had been a mask of shock. Seeing his baffled gaze, Dingo had retold the story about the explosion that had created Jeb's kind. At the end of his incredible story, Makero had looked stunned. Jeb had gazed at Dingo in surprise, seeming amazed to learn how his kind had been created. After Dingo had finished his story, Saderia had told Makero how she had discovered Jeb. She explained the mystery that had surrounded Jeb's life and how she and Dash had helped him finally put the pieces together in the end to discover the truth about Zerone, Keruni, and the fire. Makero had looked stunned by her story and seemed even more surprised when she explained that Jeb was part of the prophecy. After a long, uneasy hesitation, Saderia had also explained to him that Jeb and his kind had been the ones who had sabotaged them. The King's eyes darkened at the news, but once she had explained everything, he heaved a sigh and told Jeb he was willing to let bygones be bygones.

Once everything had been explained and Makero had gotten used to seeing Dingo and Jeb, Saderia had cautiously asked him if they could stay with them when they moved back to the old forest. After a tiny moment of consideration, Makero had agreed. With his agreement, it was just a matter of gaining the forest's approval.

After days of walking, the five of them settled down to sleep. Curling up next to her friends, Saderia closed her eyes and fell asleep before she even realized she was tired. Blackness surrounded her when she blinked open her eyes, making a jolt of alarm race up her spine. The panic died away when the darkness began to fade into a familiar, blurry scene. Desert sand dunes rose up around her in all directions. Taking a cautious step forward, she looked up and smiled at the spirit that sat in front of her.

Claw met Saderia's gaze before stepping toward her, her light brown fur and bright pink ribbon seeming to shimmer in the dim light. A weak smile spread across her face. "Congratulations on your crafty escape," she murmured. "I'm glad all of you were able to get away without injury and I think Jeb's happy that he was able to help."

Saderia grinned. "Really? I hoped he was okay."

She nodded slowly. "Yes, he's doing fine. He's glad he could finally get up the courage to do something brave." Her eyes twinkled in the dim light. "Anyway, I just wanted to tell you how impressed I am. It was a good

thing you thought quickly and Jeb acted bravely. You were able to escape with almost no injuries. Good job.”

Saderia gave her an embarrassed smile. “Thanks, Claw.”

The spirit grinned. “Good luck with the rest of your journey, Saderia. I’ll be watching out for you. Just remember...” Her eyes darkened. “This is nowhere near the end. You found your father and united your friends, but there is a lot more you’ll have to face. There are a lot of loose ends you’ll have to tie up. The path I see ahead of you is anything but easy.” Her eyes bored into Saderia’s. “Are you prepared to face the future?”

A tiny shiver crept up Saderia’s spine at the spirit’s words, but after a long moment of hesitation, she forced herself to nod and suppress a sigh. “Yes, I’m prepared.”

Claw smiled a weak smile. “Good. As long as you’re ready, I know you can do anything.” She flicked her gently with her tail. “Goodbye, Saderia, and good luck.”

Stars glimmered in the sky on the seventh day of their journey. Stumbling forward with her eyes blurred with exhaustion, Saderia staggered to the top of another sand dune with her friends close behind her. Looking up, she blinked and gasped, feeling the exhaustion, pain, and hunger fade away. Tall trees rose up in front of her, covered in brilliant purple, green, pink, and blue leaves. Wild orange, black, yellow, and turquoise bushes sprung up around the bases of the trees and stiff green grass stretched out toward them. Jeb’s forest spread out in front of them, welcoming them back. The rainbow-colored leaves stood completely still and the forest remained deathly silent.

Feeling her heart lift with hope and excitement, Saderia couldn’t stop herself from smiling. Flicking her tail eagerly, she raced toward Jeb’s forest with Dash, Dingo, Jeb, and Makero following close behind her. She lunged forward when she reached the bottom of the sand dune and dove into a clump of bushes on the outskirts of the woods. Without pausing to stop and look around at the strange plants, she raced through the forest.

Weaving in and out of the trees and ducking under low-hanging branches, she ran as fast as she could. Letting her raw paws thud roughly against the ground, she led the way through the woods, leaping over puffy clumps of bushes and avoiding roots growing up in her path. She looked up



at the sound of a thud and saw Dash jump forward to race beside her, his amber eyes gleaming with excitement. He grinned when he caught her eye and angled his ears backward. Glancing back, she saw Makero, Dingo, and Jeb chasing after them and couldn't help but giggle when she heard Dingo let out an annoyed growl and yank his paw out of a tangled clump of weeds. Grinning, she bolted through the forest, ignoring the blur of colors around her. Panting with tiredness, she started to slow down when the undergrowth suddenly fell away to the sides. Skidding to a halt, she stopped on the edge of a wide clearing and looked up to see her tall, rocky den rise up in front of her, nearly touching the tops of the trees. An eager smile spread across her face.

Looking back, she saw Dingo and Jeb stumble to a halt behind her with Makero close behind them. Grumbling to himself, Dingo stepped forward, trying to shake the weeds off his paw. Jeb cautiously stepped up behind him, eyeing Saderia's house with narrowed, uneasy blue and green eyes. Gazing up at his home, Makero stalked forward to stand in front of Saderia and Dash and managed a tiny smile.

"Looks like we're home," the King murmured.

Saderia grinned, then looked over at Jeb and rested her tail gently on his shoulders. "Why don't you and Dingo wait here while we talk to our family? There's going to be a lot of confusion and excitement when they see us and it might be best to wait to introduce you. Especially you, Jeb, since they've never seen you before."

Dingo nodded. "Just get us when you need us." Flicking Jeb with his tail, he led him away to stand in the shadows of the woods. Jeb cast one last anxious glance at Saderia before following Dingo and standing close beside him, hidden by a blue bush.

Saderia gave them a grateful smile, then turned around to glance back and forth between Dash and her father. Her eyes gleamed with excitement and a grin twitched at the corners of her mouth as she raced toward her home. "Mom! Cia! Uncle Jash!" she called, lunging forward with Dash and Makero close behind her. "We're home!"

A moment of silence filled the air as the three of them skidded to a halt just a few paces away from the jagged entrance of the den. Minutes later, the sound of paw steps clicking against stone sounded from inside the den and the tired, ruffled-looking face of Cia poked out from around the

corner. Her eyes narrowed with confusion, but when she looked up and spotted the three of them, her blue irises lit up with shock and amazement.

“Saderia? Dash?” She stumbled out of the den and gaped at them in incredulity.

Uncle Jash padded curiously out behind her and froze in shock. “You’re back!”

Cia stared at them in amazement. Her blue eyes grew wide with disbelief. “Makero!” she gasped. “You’re alive! They really did find you and bring you back!”

Makero smiled. “They saved my life.” He flicked her gently with his tail. “I’m so glad to see you two again and I know we’re going to have a long reunion, but right now I need to see Karenisha. I have some things I need to clear up with her.”

Cia’s eyes darkened and the smile faded from her face. Behind her, Uncle Jash blinked and looked up at Makero with wide, nervous eyes and a dark, grim expression.

A dark feeling rose in Saderia’s chest. “Where’s Mom?” she demanded.

Cia giggled nervously. She and Uncle Jash exchanged a terrified glance, avoiding the curious gazes of their family members. A long moment of silence spread out between them before Cia slowly raised her head to look at them. “Well...” she stammered. “While you were gone...Karenisha really wasn’t doing well. We tried to watch her, but...”

“Wait.” Uncle Jash pressed a paw to Cia’s shoulder to stop her. After a long hesitation, he slowly backed into the den and after several minutes reappeared holding a crumpled up paper. His eyes grew dark with unease as he handed the paper to Saderia.

Saderia took the paper cautiously, watching him with narrowed, confused amber eyes. Glancing down at the paper, she tried to ignore the feeling of dread rising in her chest and the fast beat of her heart. Makero and Dash gathered around her and peered over her shoulder as she slowly unfolded the paper and held it out in front of her.

“Dear Cia and Jash...” Saderia narrowed her eyes and scanned her mother’s neat handwriting, feeling her heart beat faster and faster at each word. “...I cannot stay in this forest any longer waiting to die...I have no choice...I’m leaving the forest and I am never coming back.” She looked up

with eyes wide with horror and let the paper flutter to the ground and fold in on itself, hiding all but the last two words. "Love, Karenisha."

Makero stared down at the letter in silence, his eyes dark with horror and solemnity. Dash gaped down at the paper in shock, his eyes wide with dismay. Silence spread out between them, making the air around them feel thick and uncomfortable.

After a moment that felt like a lifetime, Makero finally looked up and stared at Cia and Uncle Jash with cold, glinting green eyes. "How did this happen?"

Cia closed her eyes and hung her head. "I'm so sorry, Makero. We tried to watch her, but she must have snuck out while we were asleep. She had talked about leaving, but we never thought she was serious. She wasn't in her right mind, but I never thought..." She trailed off while Uncle Jash rested his tail comfortably on her shoulder.

Saderia stared at them in horror, her eyes wide and her heart pounding frantically. The dark instinct burning in her chest overwhelmed her, sending shivers of dread racing down her spine. "My Mom's...gone?"

Dash gaped at them in shock and disbelief. "Where could she have gone?"

Uncle Jash shook his head miserably, while Cia squeezed her eyes shut to avoid their gazes. "I don't know," Uncle Jash muttered. "She could have gone anywhere."

Saderia's eyes widened in dismay and a cry tore out of her throat before she could stop it. "She can't be gone! I just found Dad...everything was supposed to be fine!"

Uncle Jash looked away with a guilty expression. Saderia barely noticed him or any of her family members. Her mind whirled with panic and fear at the thought of her mother roaming around in the forest, the desert, or somewhere else entirely all by herself.

Makero sat in silence for ages before letting out a sigh and looking up with grief-stricken eyes. "Cia, Jash, listen to me. The hunters are gone. We have our forest back."

Cia blinked in shock and disbelief. "Wh-what?"

"Our old forest is ours again," Makero growled, sternly meeting her gaze. "We have to leave as soon as possible."

Cia opened her mouth to speak, but before she could utter a word, Saderia whipped around and gaped at him in horror. “*What?*”

Makero narrowed his eyes and glanced down at her with a stern, unwavering expression. “I have to think of the forest. I have to put them first, Saderia.”

She lashed her tail in fury while Dash stared up at his adopted father in shock and dismay. “My Mom is out there alone! What if something happens to her?”

Makero gritted his teeth. “We’ll come back!” His eyes gleamed with fury, but when he saw Saderia blink in shock, he let out a sigh and lowered his voice. “Saderia, I love your mother and I’m just as afraid for her as you are, but right now we have to think of the forest. I don’t know what happened to Karenisha while I was gone, but she *can* take care of herself. As soon as we lead the kingdom to our old home, we’ll look for her.”

Saderia stared up at him with wide, terrified amber eyes and opened her mouth to protest, but couldn’t find any words to fight back. She knew she had to put the animals in her kingdom first. Months had passed by with nothing but disasters and pain for them in Jeb’s forest. If they truly could return to their old forest, all of the forest animals would want to go back as soon as possible to spare themselves any more heartbreak or pain. She knew she had to put their needs first, but she couldn’t help but picture her mother wandering out in the desert alone with no idea where to go or what to do. Pain surged through her body when she imagined dingoes discovering her mother or pictured seeing Karenisha leap over a sand dune and find herself teetering on the edge of the Snake Pit. A thousand dangers seemed to lie in wait for her in the world around them and Saderia had only encountered a few of them. What if she got hurt...or worse?

“Cia, Jash.” Saderia blinked out of her terrifying thoughts and stared up at her father with wide, frightened eyes as he stared sternly at her aunt and uncle. “Organize a meeting. I have to tell the forest about this news. After the meeting is over, we’ll organize a search party for Karenisha to scan the forest. If we don’t find her, we’ll have to leave. Have you already tried sending out a search party to explore the woods and look for her?”

Cia shifted uncomfortably back and forth and avoided his gaze. “We’ve gotten a few confidants like Maeta to search, but we haven’t

officially announced it or sent out huge search parties. We didn't want the forest to find out and panic."

"They have to know sooner or later," Makero muttered, his eyes darkening and narrowing. "Get started on the meeting."

Exchanging a nervous glance, Cia and Uncle Jash hastily stumbled to their paws and scuttled off into the woods surrounding the den, their tails disappearing behind a clump of undergrowth. As soon as the two tigers had vanished, leaving Saderia standing frozen to the spot next to Dash and Makero, a soft voice called out to them.

"What's going on?"

She turned at the sound of the quiet voice to see Dingo step out from behind the undergrowth on the edge of the forest and pad toward her. His light brown eyes narrowed with confusion and worry when he spotted the horrified expression on her face. Leading Jeb along with him, he padded forward and stopped just in front of her to rest his tail worriedly on her shoulder. "What happened?"

Saderia stared up into his light brown eyes with a stunned, dismayed expression before turning to gaze down at her paws, unable to say a word.

Dash looked up with dark eyes and took a deep breath. "Karenisha's missing."

Dingo's eyes widened in shock. "Saderia's mother?"

Beside him, Jeb looked up in surprise and wonder, his eyes narrowing when he caught sight of Saderia and Dash's grave expressions.

Makero heaved a long sigh and turned around to look down at them. "Yes, Saderia's mother is missing." Pain gleamed in his green eyes no matter how hard he tried to hide it. "Nonetheless, we still have to return to our old forest. I have to think of my kingdom first. It's my duty."

Jeb gaped at him in shock, while Dingo studied the King carefully for a long moment and finally nodded, his eyes darkening. "I understand," the canine murmured, glancing up with dull, sympathetic eyes. "If you want, I could lead your kingdom across the desert to the old forest. I know the way by heart and I know which places to avoid."

Makero blinked in surprise, then managed a weak, grateful smile. "Very well. I will leave my forest in your paws. Thank you, Dingo."

Dingo dipped his head in respect and stepped back to stand close to Saderia, wrapping his paw over hers. Saderia heaved a sigh and stared

down at her paws, pressing close to Dash. She looked up with dull, defeated eyes and met Jeb's anxious gaze.

Flicking her tail, she nodded to the woods behind her. "Go find your family, Jeb. Tell them what happened and ask them if they want to leave. We'll be going soon." Her voice nearly cracked on her last words and a wave of pain and grief crashed over her when she realized what she was leaving behind.

Jeb studied her for a long moment with worried blue and green eyes before slowly padding past her. His sympathetic gaze lingered on her as he reluctantly trailed back toward his Spring. Only when he reached the edge of the woods did he finally tear his eyes off her and lunge into the undergrowth to race back to his mother and father.

Saderia squeezed her eyes shut when he had disappeared and let out a shaky sigh, struggling to push away the pain burning in her heart. Dash wrapped his tail gently around hers, but he couldn't wash away the sorrow spreading through her body.

Makero looked down at her and lowered his gaze to the ground. "I'm sorry," he murmured, "but this is my duty. Please stay here at the house while I'm at the meeting."

Saderia nodded numbly, avoiding his miserable gaze. "I understand, Dad."

The King studied her for a long moment before sadly nodding and looking away. After a long moment of hesitation, he slowly turned and padded toward the edge of the woods to gaze out at the forest around him, waiting for Cia and Uncle Jash to return.

Painful thoughts swirled through Saderia's mind. Images of her mother getting attacked by dingoes or stumbling into even greater danger whirled through her mind, making her wince. Grief made her fur prickle when she remembered her mother's battered appearance and the weakness that seemed to haunt her every step. A shiver traveled down her spine when she remembered the dull, empty look in her mother's lifeless eyes. What if she had caused her mother to leave by running away and leaving her behind in such a fragile state? What if it was her fault her mother was in danger?

Shuddering at the thought, she struggled to push the agonizing idea away and felt tears sting the corners of her eyes. A wave of pain and guilt crashed over her, but she squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to look

up at the forest around her. Gritting her teeth, she narrowed her eyes and dug her claws deep into the ground, struggling to push away the pain and hopelessness burning in her heart. There *had* to be *something* she could do. Her amber eyes gleamed and blazed with determination. As soon as she brought her kingdom home to safety, she would look for her mother. No matter what danger might lie in wait for her or what challenges she might have to face, she would find a way to bring her mother back to her true home. She had four good friends that would help her in any way they could. With them, she knew she could find a way to help Karenisha.

Raising her head, she looked up at the stars glimmering above her and narrowed her blazing amber eyes in determination. “Don’t worry, Mom. Wherever you are or wherever you end up, I promise...I will find you.”



**Sarah Renée** has loved writing from an early age. She has been writing short stories since the age of four, and at the age of ten, she came up with the idea for The Tiger Princess. She wrote the novel when she was twelve. She is fascinated with wild animals and the wild world outside her home and has an obvious great love of tigers. She enjoys spending time with her cats, reading, drawing, and playing her violin when she is not writing. In her free time, she is constantly daydreaming about her many characters, creating new ones, and coming up with interesting adventure story ideas. She is fifteen years old.

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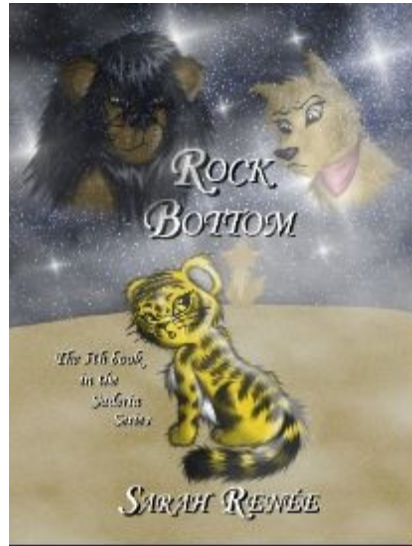
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# Saderia Series Book 5:

## Rock Bottom



*War is brewing...*

With a missing Queen and an entire forest to rebuild, Saderia's homecoming is tainted with worry. Her fears grow stronger when she leaves the forest and stumbles upon outcasts in the desert who are desperate for her help. The desert's newest Leader, Rock, has been terrorizing the exiled dingoes...but he holds a darker secret as well. A secret that could destroy Saderia's entire forest.

While Saderia struggles to find her mother, Dash finds himself dreaming about a haunting clearing. A mysterious enemy from the past begins visiting him under the guise of helping him. But whose side is he really on?

As the threat of war looms on the horizon, Saderia tries to do what's right, Dash plots in the shadows to win the war, and Dingo struggles to find a way to save the outcasts. Battles are waged, dangerous plots are formed, enemies become allies...and in the end, nothing is the same...

Check out [Rock Bottom](#) on Amazon, or read an excerpt on the next page!

# Rock Bottom

## Chapter One

Alone

The Queen was alone. After all that had happened, after all the time she had spent watching her family members disappear, she was alone. A barren sea of sand dunes spread out in all directions. Mile upon mile of gritty light brown sand stretched out before her everywhere she looked. Boiling hot sunlight beat down on the grainy ground, making the entire land seem hazy. Simmering waves of heat curled up off the sand and rose up to the clear blue sky. A soft sigh breathed out of the Queen's throat. The entire world seemed to blur around her, making her stumble across the ground. Her shadowed amber eyes grew dull with defeat.

Too many days to count had passed under the blazing sun. Beat down by the piercing rays, she found herself stumbling aimlessly across the sand, her eyes half-closed and her vision blurry. Lack of sleep and lack of food had created dark bags under her eyes and made her ribs poke out of her gaunt sides, but she didn't care. The exhaustion and the hunger pains distracted her from thinking about her lost family. Considering she hadn't brought any food when she had left her broken home, the fact that she had actually survived this long surprised her. But somehow she had managed to keep herself alive by using the skills Saderia had taught her.

*Saderia.* The thought sent a jolt of pain shooting through her. Wincing, Karenisha tried to push the image of her daughter out of her mind, but it refused to go away. Salt rose in her throat like a bitter wave and she squeezed her eyes shut to try to block out the pain at the thought of Saderia. Saderia, her brave-hearted daughter with enough courage to put even the toughest warriors to shame. Saderia, the one who had used her bravery and wit to survive countless hard times—outrunning dangerous hunters, navigating the nearly endless desert, and fighting off blood-crazed dingoes. Saderia, the daughter she admired more than anyone. The daughter she had lost.

On all of her wild adventures, Saderia had been accompanied by Dash, her closest friend and Karenisha's adopted son. The dark lion had stuck by Saderia's side through thick and thin. More loyal than anyone, Dash probably would have died for Saderia. Both young animals had been through everything together and had worked together to overcome even the hardest obstacles. Whenever she had thought of them before, her chest would swell with pride, but now all she felt was sorrow.

Saderia and Dash were gone.

Who was to blame for their deaths? That question had haunted Karenisha throughout her journey. Someone had to be responsible for their fate. Was it only the hunters—who must have been the ones to kill them—who were solely to blame? Or was her own husband, Makero, partly to blame? After all, he had been foolish enough to leave their strange home and walk right into the hunters' territory in the hopes that they had left their old home. Saderia and Dash had followed him to their deaths.

Foolish or not, though, who could blame Makero for leaving the strange forest to investigate their old home? He hadn't known how badly things would turn out. Maybe the odd forest was to blame because of how unlivable it was. The strangeness of the forest had made the forest animals so desperate to leave that Makero had decided to journey all the way back to their old, hunter-infested forest to see if it was possible to move back home, only to find out that it wasn't.

More than anyone else, Karenisha blamed herself. She knew she should have stopped Makero from leaving to go to the old forest. Her Dreams and the instinctual premonitions that ran in her blood had hinted at the danger, but they hadn't been clear or powerful enough to warn her properly. Even so, she had still felt an unnerving, warning premonition when Makero had first decided to leave. At the time, she had passed off the feeling as just ordinary worry. That had been a mistake.

After Saderia and Dash had left to find Makero, Karenisha had wanted to hope that they would be okay. After all, they had brought along their canine friend, Dingo, who knew the desert inside and out. But that didn't matter. Not if they were purposely seeking out the hunters that had captured Makero. No matter how much Karenisha tried to fool herself, she couldn't deny it. There was no way Saderia and Dash could have survived.

Karenisha hadn't had a choice. Her only option had been to leave the forest, what was left of her family, and the citizens of the kingdom behind. She just couldn't take staying in that house any longer, with painful thoughts of her daughter, Dash, and Makero constantly running through her mind. Makero had left the forest in the hopes of making a better life for the forest animals. She had decided to do the same.

The only problem was that she didn't know where she was going or if there was anywhere *to* go. It didn't matter, though. All she wanted to do was get away from the strange forest and the painful memories it contained.

A strange, unnerving sensation suddenly shot through her, shattering her thoughts and making her look up sharply, her eyes wide with alarm. Fear washed over her and she froze in place, pricking her ears and looking around warily. The eerie, uncomfortable feeling of eyes boring into her back swept over her, making her fur prickle with discomfort. Alarm shone in her eyes. It felt as if she were being...watched.

A soft snicker sounded somewhere in the blurry, boiling haze of sand dunes. Her ears pricked up rapidly. Somewhere in the distance, she thought she could hear the faint murmur of voices. All the fur on her back stood on end. Feeling her heart skip with alarm, she pricked her ears and looked around wildly, but heard nothing. The desert was silent... Shaking her head, she pushed away her worry, telling herself she was just being paranoid and hearing things. Keeping her head down, she hastily started walking again and tried to ignore an uncomfortable premonition that something was off.

Despite her best efforts to ignore it, though, the uneasy feeling lingered. Images of the bloodthirsty, desert-dwelling dingoes flitted through her mind, raising all the fur on her back. The Queen tried to tell herself that there was nothing out there, but she still felt as if she was being watched by malevolent eyes. Swallowing hard, she slowly started walking, glancing surreptitiously over her shoulders at every step. Part of her wanted to run, but another part warned her not to draw any more attention to herself. Unease whirled through her mind. She was sure she heard a voice and a cruel laugh somewhere in the distance. Nervously, she picked up her pace.

Eyes seemed to bore into her from every direction. Shuffling warily through the sand, Karenisha told herself she was just hearing things, but she

couldn't shake off a lingering sense of unease. Out there, all alone, with no one left to defend her and no one left for her to lose, anything could happen.

In a sleepy, mystical world, a light brown spirit gazed down at a faraway land, her light brown eyes glimmering with worry. An eerie blue glow illuminated her shaggy light brown fur and cast an otherworldly light across the worn, pink ribbon tied around her neck. Sleepy, ghost-like sand dunes spread out all around her, seeming even more endless than the desert of the living world. Nothing stirred in the silent, dream-like desert. A heavy sigh escaped the spirit's mouth.

Already, she could tell things weren't going to end well. Nonetheless, she watched the vision of the living world's desert closely, afraid of what she might see but determined to know the outcome. Sympathy gleamed in her light brown eyes as she took in the ragged tiger in the scene below her. She knew how the tiger Queen felt. Even after so much time had passed, she still missed her living brother as much as the tiger missed her supposedly dead family.

As the ghost dingo watched, a memory nagged at her mind—a strange memory of another spirit she had seen just that day. The other eerie spirit had been watching the same tiger she was now watching. Why he had been watching Saderia's mother, she didn't know, but a dark instinct told her it wasn't for anything good. A cold sense of trepidation washed over her at the thought of the strange spirit. Something about him was very off.

Another memory haunted her mind, making her think of another strange animal she had been watching. A living being rather than a ghost, the other animal was a dusty dark brown, long-haired dingo, one she knew would cause lots of problems. The fact that he was plotting something dangerous was obvious. What that plot was and what it involved was not... Yet. For days, she had watched the dingo control his newly acquired minions and order them to search for her brother to kill him. The thought made her shiver. That dingo was planning something. She knew it...She just didn't know what it was. What a pity she couldn't see the future...

The strange spirit she had seen, combined with the dusty dingo and the lost Queen, spelled out a very ominous future. The light brown dingo glanced back down at the tiger and bit her lip. Already, she could tell that

Saderia's future was going to get rough. Claw winced as she stared down at the tiger, then squeezed her eyes shut. "This is going to get messy..."

Sunlight shimmered down on the boiling hot sand of the desert, illuminating the fur of a gaunt, yellow brown dingo. Pain shadowed his dark brown eyes. A crowd of gaunt, nervous dingoes sat in front of him on the flat, simmering ground, their fur messy and unkempt and their eyes shadowed with weakness, exhaustion, and pure fear. A weary sigh escaped the yellow brown canine's throat. In all his life, he had never seen dingoes look so pitiful and afraid, but considering their miserable situation, he couldn't blame them for their fear. Hopelessness haunted him just looking at them and knowing they were but a shadow of their former selves. None of them could put up a fight to save their lives—something that could prove deadly in their current position.

Never before had the yellow brown dog felt as hopeless as he did now. Thunder didn't know what he could do to save the other dingoes. Until now, he had never known that desert life could be so cruel...but now he realized that it always had been. He just hadn't been able to see it in time.

Dingo had been able to see it. Guilty memories of the exiled different dingo hated by the pack burned in the yellow brown canine's mind. Last he had heard, Dingo was still alive and living with the forest food, so maybe after all those years of suffering, he finally had a decent life. Thunder hoped so. Now that he realized just how cruel the pack was, he couldn't help but remember all the evil things they had done to Dingo. How he had survived was a mystery to Thunder. Now that he knew the truth, the yellow brown dingo doubted he could survive the next week, much less the full twelve years Dingo had survived. His belly was thin and gaunt from months of hunger, his body was haunted by exhaustion, and his mind was plagued with defeat.

Thunder gazed out at the outcasts before him. All of their faces were twisted with hopelessness and desperation. Thunder wished he could help them, but he didn't know how. All he knew was that they couldn't go on like this.

"Someone help us," Thunder murmured. "Please, before it's too late..."

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